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## - Harry Potter and the Shadows of the Watchgate -

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### Prologue

*Darkness surrounded him, engulfing him in its clutches. The soft tap of footsteps told him that he was being pursued. He increased his pace, plunging headlong into the deep blackness, but the pursuer followed him like his own shadow. He kept on running, but however he tried to lose it, the shadow never left his heels. He went through the length of a thick forest but still the shadow followed suit.*

*He finally saw a clearing at the end of the forest and something told him that if he reached it, everything would be all right. However, he was shocked to find thousands of eyes blinking at him sinisterly, following his progress. A hoard of gaping snake statues loomed over his path, reminding him of one of his previous escapades.*

*The shadowy figure inched nearer without even missing a beat. Harry Potter felt the first signs of impending doom with the tightening of his stomach as he saw the figure wearing a grotesque metal mask. He tried to get out of its way but faltered when he saw the figure take off the deathly mask.*

*It was the face of his Godfather, Sirius Black, contorted in severe pain.*

"Harry! No!"

*The scene dissolved to a familiar place—the voice still echoing—to a dilapidated graveyard.*

*"Avada Kedavra!" a voice reverberated, and Harry was hit with a green bolt of lightning, making him sink to the ground in a heap, darkening his world.*

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## - CHAPTER 1 - Harry Distressed -

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Harry Potter woke up with his scar prickling horribly and sweat trickling down his spine. He had seen his Godfather again in his dreams, which was becoming fairly usual during this year's summer holidays.

Harry fingered his still-tingling scar. That scar was a legend in itself, a lightning bolt-shaped remnant of Lord Voldemort's first downfall. But a year ago Voldemort had risen again, bringing with him a tidal wave of destruction for the world-and for Harry Potter in particular. Because it was the Boy-Who-Lived who had mired his plans to rule the world. It was Harry Potter who had fought him three times before, thwarting all his plans. He had even battled the memory of the man who had become Lord Voldemort from Tom Marvolo Riddle.

Harry Potter was more than just a soon to be sixteen-year-old boy; he was a wizard, living with his Muggle aunt and uncle in Privet Drive because his parents had been killed by the Dark Lord when he was only a year old, because of a prophecy. Harry's shoulders were practically sagging under the weight of the knowledge that he was the only one who could ever defeat Voldemort. The prophecy ... *Neither can live while the other survives...*

Harry was just putting on his glasses when the door of his room shook violently on its hinges, as if someone was trying to bash it in.

*Dudley!* he thought, silently cursing his cousin.

He gingerly plunked his tired body from the flabby old bed, which once belonged to the same cousin who-(the door shook violently again)-was shoulder-butting the door.

"I'm UP!" Harry shouted in a carrying voice, tinged with a threat of *go-away-or-you'll-regret-it-later*, and to his relief heard his cousin's retreating thumps on the stairs of number four, Privet Drive.

Harry looked about at the mess that had become characteristic of his room. Strewn clothing, loose parchments and different books with titles like, *"Quidditch through the Ages"*, *"Advanced Defense: when there is no other way"*, *"Standard Book of Spells, Grade Five"*, and

*"Year with a Yeti,"* were lying face down on the floor, as if someone had tried to read them all at once, but lost interest.

Harry checked the time after freshening up and an ungainly attempt at making his hair lie flat. It was ten o'clock and he was sure that his uncle, Vernon Dursley, would have gone to his office by now.

Harry sighed in relief and made for the kitchen. He had been avoiding the Dursleys, especially his uncle, since the last showdown after he returned from Hogwarts, school of witchcraft and wizardry, three weeks ago. He didn't want another row with his uncle on how he should behave around the house and how he had always been the cause of their distress from the time they had adopted him fifteen years ago.

"Quite an early riser you have become, boy!" Vernon Dursley scowled at him from over the top of the newspaper he was reading, his bottlebrush moustache quivering irritably.

Dudley Dursley, who had been waiting for a moment just like this, sniggered in glee at the bespectacled teen in front of him, while his mother, Petunia Dursley, who had been busy eyeing the next-door neighbor's backyard, busied herself with the dirty dishes in the sink, as if going for a War Against Uncleanliness.

Harry was appalled to see his uncle, still in the house at ten o'clock, when it suddenly dawned on him that it was not a weekday but a Sunday. He had again lost the track of time and was face to face with his uncle, whom he had been avoiding for quite a while.

"Don't look as if you are lost. The way you act, you should be made the supreme ruler of the world!" Uncle Vernon spat in indignation. "Don't know what kind of education (said as if it were a swear word) you get from the cock and bull stories they teach you in your filthy little school."

Dudley smirked with pleasure seeing his father having a go at Potter, something he never had the courage to do himself lately, while Harry bit his tongue to stop himself before retorting at the bullfrog sitting in front of him.

Harry knew better than to retort as lately he had stopped trusting his instincts because they always ended up in making a mess of everything he did. So, he spun around on the balls of his feet and made his way to the front door, informing them in a shaky distant voice that he was going for a walk. He didn't wait to listen to his uncle's further mockery either of the world he belonged to or his being there in the first place.

It was a fact that another world existed, one that was almost hidden from the normal world of Muggles; a world of wizards and witches and many things magical. But as the settling gloom in his life, a dark wizard was gathering strength in the wizarding world and almost everyone was feeling the tension of it.

These holidays had been very difficult for Harry in spite of the fact that the Dursleys had kept their distance, with the exception of their occasional malicious remarks. This behavior was mostly credited to the threats made by Mad Eye Moody, the ex-Auror, at the end of last term.

Harry strolled towards his usual haunts, where he liked to sit alone and think. To the passersby he only seemed a teenager who had grown up suddenly. He had an aura about him, which instantly attracted attention but also declared - 'Stay away'.

He had been fending off his frustration by having a go at Dudley's punching bag. At least, it made his body ache after the continuous blows and his mind was left almost blank by the mechanical one-two.

But whatever he tried, he couldn't wipe out the memory of Sirius falling behind the veil in the Death Chamber. That scene played again and again in his mind until his fists clenched and he was shaking all over in agony, which made it even more pleasant to just let go and jab at the lifeless bag.

There was so much rage inside him for himself, that he couldn't even express it in words or even in thoughts. He had so typically played the hero and caused the downfall of the person who had been the closest thing he had to a family of his own. He had never felt so alone in his life. He just wanted to run away to some place, where there was no Voldemort and none of this excruciating pain.

Pain was not new to him because he had already gotten a load by losing his parents to a dark wizard. But, in the case of the death of his Godfather; actually seeing the whole scene made it more vivid, and he couldn't help but feel vulnerable.

At night, Harry returned to number four, as he had been instructed by the members of the Order of the Phoenix, a not-so-secret faction of wizards who were devoting to fighting Voldemort and his Death Eaters. The Order had been telling everyone they could, that Voldemort had regained his body, but no one heeded them until about a month ago, when to their dismay, living proof of He-Who-Must-Not-be-Named's return had appeared before their eyes.

Hedwig, his pet owl and his oldest friend, clicked her beak on her cage as he entered his semi-dark room. A letter was resting on his desk and by the looks of it; Hedwig wanted him to see it first thing. It was the familiar scrawl of his friend, Ron, but very uncharacteristically short for him.

*Harry, we are coming to get you tomorrow, so pack your things. I reckon we'll talk when we meet. - Ron*

At last, good news; the Order was finally coming to get him. He felt relieved that this year they hadn't kept him waiting for long. Though they had been more communicative than ever but Voldemort wasn't making much news. What Harry dreaded the most was that this silence was a warning of the upcoming storm.

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Four familiar members of the Order: Tonks, Moody, Lupin and Kingsley, came at night the next day to get him.

"Wotcher, Harry!" said Tonks, in her usual earnest way, smiling at him.

Lupin didn't say much except, "All ready?" to which Harry only nodded.

It was difficult for him to see them all again and not remember the last time they had battled the Death Eaters together. He snapped out of

his reverie when he encountered the Dursleys downstairs, huddled in the drawing room, eyeing the four wizards accompanying him as if they were a bunch of criminals. Harry smiled as he remembered the last time Moody and his Uncle met. Moody had threatened Vernon Dursley to behave himself or else.

The ex-Auror gave a special wink to Uncle Vernon, setting Vernon's triple chin aquiver and even with too many things running through his mind Harry couldn't help but to be amused at the situation. He looked back the last time before being *Disillusioned* by Moody and was startled to find his Aunt looking at him with narrowed eyes.

Just like the previous year, they traveled by broomstick. But there was one difference; they were all silent, like there was an un-written contract between them that they would not discuss Sirius, at least not for now. The thrill that Harry always felt by riding his Firebolt was not there anymore. It was like all his happy feelings were banished from his heart, leaving a hollow space behind.

Harry had thought they were going to the Burrow, thinking that the Order must have found a new headquarters by now, but the London neighborhood they were approaching looked all too familiar. He was back at number twelve, Grimmauld Place.

As he dismounted from his frosty broom, Tonks gave him a furtive look and Lupin grasped his shoulder. A house appeared out of thin air, just in between numbers eleven and thirteen, and they entered Sirius's old family house.

Harry expected another blast of peculiar paraphernalia but was mildly surprised by the interior of the house, which were not as eerie as he remembered. He supposed absently that Mrs. Weasley must have been quite busy this summer, but he abandoned all thoughts of house-keeping as Hermione came running down the stairs to hug him, closely followed by Ron, who looked anxious. They made their way to the room they occupied before.

Ginny joined them on the way to the room and broke the gloomy silence, "How are you, Harry?"

"Er... fine," said Harry. He tried to smile but it turned to a grimace, midway. He saved face by grimacing more at the trunk he was carrying along with Ron, like it was much heavier than it actually was.

"Harry dear!" Mrs. Weasley bustled into the room and hugged him affectionately. "You have become quite peaky you know. Haven't you been eating properly?" said Mrs. Weasley, holding him at an arm's length and critically surveying him up and down.

Harry managed another eloquent, "Er..."

"I know it has been very difficult for you but Dumbledore said that, 'sooner you get it over with, the better,'" said Mrs. Weasley, looking apprehensive.

"Get what over with?" asked Harry, dreading something terrible.

"Well... Sirius's *will* of course," said Mrs. Weasley, looking very flustered.

Harry's parents had already left a little fortune for him; he didn't want anything from Sirius. He still blamed himself for his death. If he hadn't been foolish enough to believe his visions about Voldemort torturing Sirius, if he hadn't dozed off during his History test, if he just stayed put that day, he would have been welcomed in this house by none other than Sirius today. *If ... oh, if only!*

Harry didn't realize that he was completely still. When he came back to his senses with a jolt, he noticed that everyone in the room had the same expression of concern on their faces. He turned his back to them, feeling completely stupid and at lost of words.

He started hoarsely, "I- I don't... want-" and was swiftly cut off by Mrs. Weasley. "He was your Godfather... he wanted you to... I don't think that I have to remind you that he loved you deeply?"

Harry managed a small grunt of acknowledgement. Now that he was back with all of his friends, it was more difficult to hide his feelings. He wanted to talk to someone, but didn't know how to start. So he turned on his heel and headed for Buckbeak's room instead.

Buckbeak was resting on the floor and looked very subdued. Harry gave him a bow and the hippogriff nodded his head morosely. It was a fact that Buckbeak had seen more of his Godfather than himself and that certainly established similar feelings of melancholy between them. Hagrid was right; animals are keener about their surroundings and very much aware of human emotions.

Harry tried to feed Buckbeak but his forlorn eyes told him that he wasn't in the mood, so he seated himself comfortably beside the hippogriff instead.

Remus Lupin, Harry's one-time Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher and an old friend of his parents, joined him after a while.

"We haven't really talked for some time, have we?" he asked Harry.

"Yeah..."

Harry continued after a pause, "So, what is *really* happening? Why Voldemort so quiet?" he asked tentatively, remembering that his scar hadn't hurt him much this summer.

"We have heard some rumors, but nothing concrete. Whatever he is up to, he is not following his usual paths of destruction; this time he is working very covertly."

Lupin studied Harry keenly. The short month since he had seen him had wrought changes in Harry that were clearly visible. He had grown up. He looked far older and more mature than your average sixteen-year-old. There was something else too, something intangible, but visible nonetheless. It was the mark of a boy forced to grow up too quickly. Pain did that to a person; Lupin knew it better than most. He noticed with a bittersweet pang that Harry looked more like James than ever.

"Harry, your father was not just a bully, you know. What you saw in the Pensieve was true, but that's not the only thing your father did. James and Sirius were teenagers with exceptional skill and sometimes they just couldn't help showing off," Lupin broke off, seeing Harry's reproachful look and he knew then that his excuses weren't going to work.



"Look, they grew up to be great wizards, Harry. They devoted their lives to fight against Voldemort. It's a long story, but you may have already gotten the idea of it from Sirius."

At the mention of his godfather, Harry quickly turned away from Lupin. He began stroking Buckbeak absently, who blinked his orange eyes contentedly. Lupin sighed and moved to leave, but at the last minute changed his mind and grabbed Harry by the shoulders, spinning him around and forcing the boy to meet his eyes.

"It's *not your fault!*" he said intensely, willing Harry to believe what he said. "Sirius died with dignity, fighting the Death Eaters. His death was *not* a waste, so stop torturing yourself and start preparing for the tasks ahead, now that you know what you have to do, and what is expected of you!" Lupin stalked out of the room without waiting for a reply.

Harry stared after Lupin and it felt like that his words had somehow hit home because it seemed like a huge weight was lifted from his heart. *He shouldn't sulk*, he chastised himself. Sirius wouldn't have liked him that way at all. With a new feeling of responsibility and gratitude towards the people who cared about him and understood his feelings, he made his way to his and Ron's room.

He found Ron and Hermione lounging on the sofa. They stopped talking the moment he entered the room. Just to cover the awkward silence, Ron stupidly asked Harry about his holidays, getting a steely look from Hermione in response.

"Er... they were okay," Harry answered uneasily.

"Where did you go for vacation this summer, Hermione?" Harry asked, just to change the topic.

"Oh, nowhere. I was actually home, explaining things to my parents because they didn't know much about Death Eaters and Voldemort's history. I filled them in on everything that has happened since his return, and how things will change with the ensuing second war." She looked about to see the glum response of acknowledgement. "I have also worked on some new spells for the DA classes. Only theory, though!" she said pointedly, upon seeing Ron, who had just opened

his mouth to remind her that it was against the Decree for the Restriction of Underage Wizardry.

"Well, that was good thinking. We should definitely continue those classes," Harry said resolutely, remembering his friends fighting bravely against the Death Eaters in the Department of Mysteries last month, which had only been possible because they trained for their own defense, unlike what had been taught by their official teacher, the ex-Undersecretary to the Minister, Dolores Umbridge.

"Oh yes, we should," Hermione agreed, thinking along the same lines. "So... how are you feeling, Harry?" she finished in an undertone. Ron gave her a reproving look, but she seemed not to notice.

"Ohh... I've had better days, it's not like I'm complaining or anything, but sometimes, it's just too hard," Harry said with a sigh.

There was a sudden hush in the room while they all just stared at each other thoughtfully.

"So, have any of you heard anything unusual?" asked Harry, trying to lighten up the mood.

"Oh, nothing much. Luna Lovegood visited the Burrow last week, and she and Ginny are becoming fast friends. She didn't succeed in finding the *Crumple-horned Snorkacks*, but she has now gone on an expedition for *Fading Knockshrub*s," Ron answered, making a comic face.

"What *are* Fading Knockshrub*s*!" Harry laughed incredulously.

"Have no idea, mate, must be some *Quibbler* stuff," said Ron, thoughtfully.

Harry was just about to question them on their knowledge of prophecies when he was interrupted by two loud cracks.

Fred and George had just materialized in their room.

"Hiya, Harry!" they said in unison.

"Knew you would be coming today; so, we thought to visit, in spite of our heavy schedules." The twins exchanged meaningful looks in between themselves. "Business is flourishing as usual. Your investments have multiplied very effectively," said Fred in *all-business-no-rubbish* tone.

"That's great!" exclaimed Harry enthusiastically, not sure whether he was glad to have been interrupted, or upset. "Er... what are those?" he inquired cautiously, pointing to the green squiggly things, which resembled a baby squid, in George's hands.

"Our newest invention," said George, patting the thing fondly. "They are the '*Vanishing Hydras*'. To activate them, pinch any one of their tentacles and they will become invisible. You can place them on the floor and anyone trudging over them will be bitten and sprayed with a fountain of special solution that we invented with a generous amount of stink sap. The person will instantly sprout boils that will be painful as well as ticklish wherever the solution sprays them. We have their antidotes too, so don't look so worried!" this point was highlighted by Fred's wicked smile.

"I'll love to try this on Malfoy!" said Ron longingly.

"You'll get your chance this year, Ronniekins. Malfoy must be rolling on coals, with his dad in Azkaban," Fred said nastily, while Ron and Hermione looked reproachfully at him for completely different reasons of their own.

"I don't think that Dementors can be controlled by the Ministry anymore. Haven't they already left Azkaban?" Hermione inquired.

"Yes they have," George confirmed her doubts. "Azkaban is now guarded by a makeshift group of Auro-"

There was a loud crash outside the door and a hurried whisper of, "*Reparo*." They all knew who was coming long before she came bursting into the room.

"Dumbledore is here, Harry, he wants to see you," Tonks said in a breathless voice.

So, it is time to hear Sirius's will, Harry thought with a bottomless feeling in the pit of his stomach as he despondently followed Tonks down to the meeting room, which was actually the old living room made nice with Mrs. Weasley's cleaning.

Dumbledore and Lupin were deep in conversation when Harry entered the room. Dumbledore gave him one of those penetrating looks, as if he was x-raying him with his eyes.

"How have you been, Harry?" Dumbledore asked.

"... Okay."

"You are not at the moment, but you will be," said Dumbledore, with an understanding smile.

"Er..."

"Very well, let's get down to business. The will is quite simple," Dumbledore continued, looking down at Harry.

"Sirius has given Grimmauld Place to the Order, and he has requested the transfer of half his money to your vault in Gringotts and the remaining half to Remus's vault. He has also given you the flat in London where he used to live after he left Hogwarts. He has left all the rest of his worldly possessions to you, including this Diary." Dumbledore looked keenly over his glasses at Harry, while handing it to him.

"It is enchanted, but not like Tom's. So, you needn't worry." His blue eyes twinkled. "You should be able to work out the clues to read it easily enough-he wanted you to have it if he was unable to tell it to you himself. So, that is all I think, is it not, Remus?"

"Yes, that is all," Lupin replied hoarsely. Harry assumed that he didn't know about the content of the will, like Harry didn't know about the existence of any diary of his Godfather's.

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**Chapter Summary:** Harry meets some old friends and enemies. At last gets his O.W.L results and finds something to his dismay. Will he not be able to fulfill his dreams about being an Auror? He also starts having weird dreams and gets use to Ginny's intelligence. So, who does that echoing voice belong to? Read to ponder.

*A/N: Thank you for showing all your support, writing becomes so easy with such wonderful reviews and feedback. So, thanks to **Izzy Love's Kai, lovenhope, Blessed Spirit, Prexistence, ER Monkey, lali, saintomair, Bubbly jellyfishsl, Buck** and **memories of pain** for taking out the time.*

*I've combined the chapter for eliminating all confusion and merging the review thank yous.*

***Izzy Love's Kai,** Thank you for liking SotW. First reviewer at and what a nice start. This fic will be quite mammoth sized as I mentioned in A/N of the first chapter. This story is basically a Mystery and I'll be dealing with all the elements of Year 6 in it, so its not just about Harry milling about discovering the Diary but it's a long complete Year 6 fic.*

*Thanks for such nice words. I try my best to portray what my characters are feeling and doing as it becomes a bore when only dialogues appear in a fic without their reaction and surrounding etc. -ugh- didn't wanted to lecture -smiles-*

***lovenhope,** Thanks for the encouragement.*

***Blessed Spirit,** Thank you very much, for the detailed review. I've tried my best to be as canon as I can be when writing. And I know there are a lot of fluffy Year6 fics about, but mine's not gonna be one of those. There will definitely be Romance in it but it's not the center part. We'll actually see what Harry goes through, how he deals with things in his life including his fears. It's just my version of what I'm expecting of Book6.*

***Prexistence,** Thanks for dropping by and you'll soon know about the Diary, which will be cool, I can assure that.*

***ERMonkey, Queen of Insanity,** Thank you for your feedback.*

Thanks for the review again. -smiles- The best way to make your story keep its italics, bold and justification is by following these steps: 1) Go to doc Manager and upload "**any**" text file from your PC. I use a notepad doc with only a single word on it. 2) After uploading it, open the "Quickedit/preview" in your "Doc Manager." 3) Delete whatever there was in the doc you uploaded. 4) Open your "Microsoft Word doc" in your PC and whatever chapter you want to post, select that text and paste it in the field where you are previewing the uploaded doc. 5) Save after adding horizontal line or whatever modification you want. I have found that if you do it right in "Word" from before hand, you just need to paste in the preview section and everything is hunky-dory as you want the chapter to be. -phew-

**Lali and Bubbly**, Hey girls -huggles- thanks for reviewing here and all such nice compliments as you're my old readers. It's so good to see you here! but then again, I'm repeating myself. -grins- Thanks for liking my edited version, I can tell you, a lot of effort has sure went to this one. -nods-

**Omair/ Dexter**, -grins- Thank you pra ji. I'm feeling so good that I got you addicted to HP, evil laughter thanks for liking my version and there is more where it came from, so buckle up your seat belts and get ready for the ride.

**Jellyfishsl**, Thanks for the feedback mate. Actually I was frustrated as Harry was on Sirius's loss and that shows in my writing as well. -winks-

**Buck/ my chum**, Oh well, he'll post sometime soon and we have been friends from last year and he's always been so enthusiastic about this story. So, Thank you Buck for being there and I hope you didn't crick your neck while jet-skiing.

Found your way, eh-grins- Well, people who haven't read "Dragon Heart" should read it ASAP. It's a brilliant Ron and Hermione story and will keep you guessing till the end.

**Memories of pain**, hey, thank you. The complete chapter 2 is here for you. -smiles-

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## - CHAPTER 2 - Old Acquaintances -

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Harry went to Buckbeak's room as soon as he was dismissed by Dumbledore, which was sooner than he expected, with the appearance of Emmeline Vance.

For the last five minutes, he had been staring at the diary, mystified.

*What was in it?* he thought. Perhaps all the things that he ever wanted to know about his parents were somewhere in this diary. But he couldn't get over the fact of having to work out the clues.

*Haven't I solved enough already! ... But, maybe there is something to all this after all,* he thought grudgingly.

It was a simple diary, not Muggle-made. It had the name of 'Flourish and Blotts' and there were entries-many of them. It wasn't blank, as in the case of Tom Riddle's diary. But whenever Harry tried to open a page to read, the words just vanished. After several failed attempts of reading the fading entries, he became quite edgy and flustered. *What is all this?* he thought irately. Surely, there must be some way to open it. He couldn't do any magic on it because of the same old rule of 'Underage Wizardry'.

"Oh, when will I be of AGE!" he bellowed angrily, making Buckbeak screech alarmingly.

Harry sat there for sometime, trying every thing he could think of to crack the diary but to no avail, and when he couldn't think of anything new to do with it, he dejectedly started for his room.

He was halfway through the hallway, when he saw a small bundle just in front of Sirius's mother's portrait. The bundle was twitching and flailing-it looked like an over-large gnome covered with green pus-filled boils.

Harry thought at first that it was some new creature of the house that had somehow managed to evade Mrs. Weasley's clutches, but on a closer look, he was astonished to find Kreacher, his godfather's old and deranged house-elf, wincing in pain.

Harry looked about in dismay, as he could hear muffled laughter but it wasn't Kreacher, as he was opening and closing his mouth, but no sound of mirth or misery was coming out of it. Harry spun around and found Fred, George and Ginny emerge from behind the nearest curtain.

"We couldn't help it! He was just passing by - a beacon of light for our Hydra," said Fred between bouts of laughter.

"And because of what he did to... to-Sirius!" said Ginny, almost in a whisper. She was not laughing and her face was set in a grim expression. This transformed twin's laughs to low growls.

The scene was anything but beautiful, but in his inner heart, Harry was actually enjoying the sight of Kreacher in pain, remembering what had happened to his Godfather because of this elf's deceit and treachery... But then he felt a twinge of guilt and remembered Hermione's *S.P.E.W.*, which lead to his next thought of, *why wasn't Kreacher screaming?*

His question was answered by George, who was stuffing something yellow into Kreacher's open mouth. "After what he did last time, Dumbledore punished him with a permanent 'Silencing Charm', because he can't be set free. So he's still bound to the household and has been sworn not to tell anybody about the Order's whereabouts and the like."

Kreacher's face went slack and then he was heaved up by Fred, who said, "This is not good enough for what you did, but it is for the time being..." he trailed off threateningly, giving Kreacher a broad grin. Kreacher shot off towards the boiler room like a rocket without a single backward glance.

Harry saw all this with a kind of detachment of an outsider. During all the days that he had blamed himself, being the cause of Sirius's death, he had never thought about Kreacher as being the one to blame or even to share in it.

He went to his room and stashed away the diary in his trunk. He was not ready-at least not then-to share it with his friends. But it felt as if



some of the blackness inside him had been broken by bright rays of hope.

"Harry, dinner time." Hermione brought him back to the reality by coming inside the room.

When he went to the kitchen, even Dumbledore was present at the table, which was a first, along with Moody, Tonks, Lupin, Mrs. Weasley, the twins, and of course Ron, Hermione and Ginny. The table was filled with scrumptious delicacies. Mrs. Weasley had outdone herself, again.

Harry ate heartily, laughing at Fred and George's jokes and Tonks' morphings. He contemplated that he was not alone after all. It was a fact that no one would ever take the place of his parents and, for that matter, Sirius's, but there were others who cared about him and his well being; he should not let them down... The prophecy flashed past his eyes like a jagged blaze of lightning against a dark sky-he had to kill or be killed...

He was brought back to the real world by Dumbledore. "Harry, you will now learn Occlumency from me. I hope you don't have any problems with that?" he asked, his beard twitching.

"Oh... no, not at all!" exclaimed Harry, smiling. *This could keep Snape out of his head for good!*

After dinner, the Order members started discussing their 'confidential information' and the 'young crowd' was ushered out of kitchen.

"We've got to dash, we have an -ahem- important business appointment," said George, winking.

"See you all later," said Fred, and with the usual cracks, they Disapparated.

They all made their way to the boys' room and made themselves comfortable on the squashy chairs around the fire.

"How is that cousin of yours, Harry?" asked Ron, plopping on a settee.

"Oh, he's loads better; training to be a boxer, looking more menacing everyday, but whimpers whenever I pass him. And after the visit by our ol' Dementor friends last year, he has got oodles of motivation to crush everything in sight to pulp," said Harry with an amused look on his face.

"Why wasn't Percy here today?" asked Hermione, looking at Ron.

Before Ron could answer, Harry blurted out a loud, "Percy!"

"Oh, forgot to fill you in on the latest development in *Humungous Bighead's* position," said Ron with a smirk on his face. "After last year's Ministry of Magic fiasco, Mr. Assistant-to-the-Minister learned a very good lesson on humility: he was wrong and we were right, all along. And as you know, he's quite... well, *peculiar*-it took him a whole month to muster up his courage and apologize."

"And not to Dad directly, but through Mum, who was all but begging for the proceedings," Ginny provided.

Harry was still not used to Ginny talking. After last year's experience and the encounter with the Death Eaters at the Department of Mysteries, he was getting used to her presence, as well as intelligence.

"But Dad has refused to talk to him after what he said the last time they talked-or rowed, actually-and he is not the only one. Except for Mum, Charlie and Ginny, nobody has talked to him," said Ron, glaring daggers at Ginny.

"Hey! Don't give me that look, it's not my fault! I'm all for your not speaking to him. But he has to sort out, where his real priorities lie! He really never meant anything bad-as you know from the start, Percy has always been ambitious, he just doesn't know where to draw the line," Ginny said, in an explanatory voice.

"Well, I reckon it's high time that he does!" Ron continued menacingly. "Because unless, and until, he apologizes to Dad the right way-and I prefer begging after what he called him-till then I am not even ready to look at him!"

"Somebody has to egg him on to do that and that's what Mum and I are doing, and Charlie is keeping all the trouble at bay, so that no awkwardness arises from this whole situation," Ginny said evenly, glaring at Ron.

Ron was still gritting his teeth and Harry himself hadn't forgotten the letter Percy sent Ron last year, suggesting that he cut all ties of friendship with Harry and actually spy for Missy High Inquisitor Umbridge. Remembering that, Harry agreed with Ron entirely. He didn't care to speak to Percy either.

"Fred and George are actually so disgusted that they have put up a sign on the door of their shop saying: *no Percy zone*, whereas Bill has refused to even acknowledge his efforts of camaraderie," said Ginny in a bleak voice.

"Yeah, just as well," said Ron sourly.

"I think he's really sorry, he just can't express his emotions very well and..." Hermione trailed off and changed tracks because Ron was starting to look murderous. "I admit that he has done wrong and he should apologize to Mr. Weasley, but after his heartbreak, he is really miserable and he *needs* the family support!" Hermione said, defensively.

"Yeah. He's not even working very well for the Ministry," said Ginny worriedly.

"What kind of heartbreak?" Harry asked belatedly.

"Penelope has just broken up with him and he is miserable as a lost Knarl," said Ginny sympathetically.

"Serves him right! That haughty double-crossing numbnut," Ron barked.

At that very moment Mrs. Weasley popped her head inside the door and said, "What are you kids doing up so late?"

"We are not kids anymore, Mum!" Ron said, looking scandalized.

"Yes of course dear," Mrs. Weasley said, as if calming a four-year old boy who was craving chocolate frogs. "Now if you'll excuse me, I need to tuck the girls in."

Hermione and Ginny left laughing their heads off at Ron's gaping face, while he turned a bright shade of magenta and Harry himself couldn't help but laugh at him. The boys quickly changed into their pyjamas and went to bed with Ron saying a muffled, "Night."

Harry felt light-headed after weeks of apprehension. He had not laughed for so long, but spending only a day at Grimmauld Place made him ease off the continuous guilt that he felt. Obviously, its every nook and cranny reminded him of Sirius, but even then the bittersweet memories were all that he had of his Godfather... He could now fully appreciate how all of his friends and well wishers had tried their best to accommodate his feelings. Surely, Hogwarts was his home but Grimmauld Place was fast becoming his home away from home.

-X-

*Where was he?*

*There was so much light surrounding him and so beautiful... glowing, shimmering, white light pulsing all around him. He was groping the air to catch onto something, when he realized that he was floating.*

*He was floating! Yes... no, more like swimming.*

*He couldn't even see his own hands but he could hear something... Someone was speaking, but he couldn't hear it clearly because it was somewhat muffled, and whenever he heard that voice, the surrounding white light pulsed to different colors: blue, orange, green, red, yellow and violet.*

*"I can't let you have it!" someone said, and after a long pause, between which he heard some other voices, but they seemed to come from such a distance that he wasn't able to give any meaning to them. He heard the same voice and the light around him changed colors again.*

**"No... nooo, don't hurt him..."**

And with a flash of pain in his forehead he sat upright in his bed. His scar was throbbing and it felt like his heart was residing in his throat and beating faster by the second.

*What was all that about? And that voice... it seemed so familiar... who was it? Was this one of Voldemort's new tricks?* But he had occluded his mind before sleeping-he had emptied his mind of all thoughts, leaving only the gaping hole of Sirius. He shouldn't be feeling any emotion at all...

He checked his watch on the bedside table. It was quarter to four in the morning, and Ron was fast asleep with his usual rhythmic snores. Harry was himself in the process of going back to sleep when the light coming through the door crack was disturbed, as if somebody had just passed the door.

*Who could it be? Up so late at night?* he wondered.

His curious side got the better of him and he tip-toed towards the door to investigate the late-nighter. He opened the door and took a peek outside and didn't find anyone visible in the hallway.

Was it Kreacher, prowling the house after everyone had gone to sleep? This behavior wasn't new for him, but then again, there was a lot of difference between the Kreacher everybody thought to be 'crazy-bewildered' and the Kreacher who had spilled the beans about Sirius in front of the Malfoys.

*No, this is definitely worth checking,* Harry thought.

He made his way to the kitchen, and to his astonishment it was not Kreacher but an elf wearing about fifteen hats, lurid colored baby knickers and a woolen jumper with mismatched socks.

"Dobby?" he croaked. "What are you doing here?" he asked, "And in the dead of ni-" but was cut off by a suffocating hug from Dobby.

"Harry Potter, sir!" Dobby squealed gleefully. "Such an honor to meet you again, sir, Dobby was hoping and wishing so much to see you, sir," said Dobby looking as if his birthday wish had been granted early.

"Is everything all right? Has Dumbledore sent you to deliver a message?" asked Harry in concern.

"No, no, sir, Dobby was only cleaning," Dobby answered, waving a dust-covered cloth in front of Harry's face.

"But, wha-" again he was cut off by the elf, but to Harry's relief, it was not by another rib-cribbing hug.

"Professor Dumbledore, sir, has appointed us to clean the house, sir. Dobby has been here for exactly," counting on his long spindly fingers, "thirty seven days, sir," he then continued in a hushed tone, "and also, sir, to keep an eye on that... on Kreacher."

Comprehension dawned upon him. He knew that Kreacher was of no use, and after what he did last year, there should have been some measures taken for the safety of the Order, and also for house-keeping, because Mrs. Weasley couldn't always baby-sit the Headquarters and cook, because of her responsibilities at the Burrow.

"Professor Dumbledore chose us, Harry Potter, sir! He thought we were"-puffing up his chest out-"gallant enough for the job. He trusts Dobby, that Dobby will never tell a living soul about the Order's dwelling, Harry Potter, sir," Dobby finished toothily.

"That's great, Dobby," said Harry, genuinely pleased.

"So, Dobby and Winky comes here with Professor Dumbledore, sir, to serve the good cause, Harry Potter, sir." Dobby then continued on in a hushed voice, "He gave us a raise, Harry Potter, sir, and now Dobby is being paid *two* Galleons a week," he said, giving a disbelieving shudder.

"Winky is being paid too?" asked Harry.

"No, sir." Dobby's ears drooped. "Winky says she has not sunk so low as that, Harry Potter, sir. Winky will never want paying," said Dobby sadly.

"So it was your shadow I saw across the hallway?" Harry asked.

"Yes, sir, Dobby was returning from the hippogriff's room," answered Dobby.

"Okay, Dobby, happy cleaning then," said Harry, and he started to return to his room when he heard growling from somewhere below the kitchen level-scratching more like. He never knew that there was any sort of basement in the Grimmauld Place, but wouldn't be surprised if there was, because this house held so many things unknown.

"Is there a ghoul in this place, Dobby?" Harry enquired.

Dobby gave him a frightened stare and while wringing his hands, said, "Ghouls never make such sounds, Harry Potter, sir. Tonight's a full moon, Harry Potter, sir." Dobby gave him a pointed look.

"Is that Lupin!" Harry exclaimed.

"Yes, Harry Potter, sir. Professor Dumbledore, sir, has bounded the trap-door of the cellar, so that everyone here remains protected for their own good," said Dobby with wobbling knees.

Now Harry remembered Lupin's drawn looks. He didn't notice it before, because he had been quite occupied himself.

"Er... okay, Dobby... 'Night," said Harry.

"Good night, Harry Potter, sir." Dobby gave a sad squeak.

Harry tip-toed back across the hallway to his room. He lay down on his bed and stared at the ceiling, pondering.

Why was everything he was related to strange or weird? Couldn't he have a normal life?

His parents were brutally murdered by Voldemort because of a prophecy. He had already battled a mountain troll, giant spiders, a Hungarian Horntail, solved many enchanted puzzles, and fought Voldemort himself three times. His Godfather had been a wanted criminal, his uncle and friend was a werewolf, his known relatives were a bunch of nimrods and now he was having strange dreams... again.

*Or were they some kind of visions?*

But surely, they weren't from Voldemort's mind as they felt so pure. But then again, why did his scar hurt when he finally woke up from these visions? He had to tell all this to Dumbledore or Lupin tomorrow...

With all these thoughts still swirling in his head, Harry fell to a dreamless sleep.

-X-

Harry woke up with a start. Ron was poking him in the sides.

"Whassamatterr!" he said groggily.

"Our O.W.L results have just arrived!" Ron hollered.

"What!" Harry was instantly out of bed. "What, when, where?" he asked absently, wiping his eyes and putting on his glasses.

Ron just rolled his eyes and handed him his letter.

"What did you get, Ron?"

"You open yours, I'll open mine, then we'll swap, okay?" said Ron.

"Okay."

He tore off the official seal of the Ministry, to read:

*Dear Mr. Potter,*



*The Ministry of Magic is pleased to inform you of your O.W.L results of last month.*

*They are stated below:*

*Astronomy:     **A**     (1 owl) - 1 owl out of 1  
Care of Magical Creatures: **O** (1 owl) - 1 owl out of 1  
Charms:       **E**     (2 owls) - 2 owls out of 2  
Defense Against the Dark Arts: **O** (2 owls) - 2 owls out of 2  
Divination:       **D**     (1 owl) - failed  
Herbology:     **E**     (1 owls) - 1 owl out of 1  
History of Magic:     **P**     (1 owl) - failed  
Potions:       **E**     (1 owl) - 1 owl out of 1  
Transfiguration: **E** (2 owls) - 2 owls out of 2*

*We anticipate that you will perform as well as in your N.E.W.T exams as you have done so in your O.W.Ls. We wish you best of luck with your studies at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry.*

<i>Enjoy</i>	<i>your</i>	<i>remaining</i>	<i>holidays!</i>
<i>Sincerely</i>			<i>yours,</i>
<i>Giles</i>			<i>Eiseley,</i>
<i>Examination</i>			<i>Controller,</i>
<i>Wizarding Examinations Authority Office.</i>			

He sighed deeply... He only got an overall 'E' in Potions, which meant that his whole plan of becoming an Auror went down the drain, because as he remembered, McGonagall had warned him last term that Snape only accepted student with 'O' in O.W.Ls for his N.E.W.T classes. So his dreams to be an Auror crumbled with the results. *Oh well*, he couldn't say he was disappointed, because according to his predictions, he should have gotten an 'A' in it. He wasn't in any way expecting ten O.W.Ls.

"I failed Divination," said Ron grudgingly. "Now I can't study with Firenze."

"I did too, mate, but we weren't too good in it anyway," said Harry, swapping his results with Ron. His and Ron's results were almost identical except that, in the case of History of Magic, Ron got an 'A' and an 'E' in Care of Magical creatures, making his O.W.Ls to eleven.

"We also have to say bye-bye to our ambition of becoming Aurors," said Ron dejectedly. Harry murmured his agreement.

"But, at least you passed History. You got eleven O.W.Ls you prat; you should be happy," Harry said, raising his eyebrows.

"You *failed!*" Ron exclaimed jealously. "Agh! You are off Binns and I still have to listen to him drone on and on and-"

With a flurry of footsteps and squealing, Hermione appeared at the door. "How did you two do?" she asked excitedly, then skidded to a halt in front of them upon seeing Ron's furious look.

"Did you fail the O.W.Ls?" Hermione asked in a hushed voice, saying failed as if it was a swear word.

Ron's wrath was transferred pell-mell towards Hermione. "What do you mean, I *failed*? Who said, I failed *anything*?" Ron shouted at Hermione.

"I... um..." Hermione looked at Harry for some clue.

Harry, seeing that a raging war would ensue if he didn't do anything quickly; he swiftly came up with a reply, "Ron's just angry that he *didn't* fail History, like *I* did."

Hermione looked from Harry's grinning face to Ron's furious one, opening her mouth and then closing it, as if she couldn't find words to express her feelings.

"You are upset because you *passed* a subject?" Hermione said, unbelievably.

"Yes, exactly," Harry said before Ron could retort and poked him in the ribs to shut up.

Hermione gave an incredulous sigh, while Harry and Ron (after continuous prods from Harry), started chirruping for the sake of Hermione because they didn't want to ruin her happiness.

"Don't tell me, Hermione, you must have gotten twelve O.W.Ls," said Harry, passing her his and Ron's result, which Hermione took with a faltering smile.

"Thirteen, actually," Hermione said, grinning.

"Blimey, that must be a record, Hermione." Ron sounded impressed, while Hermione blushed.

"Congrats, Hermione," said Harry, grinning broadly.

"What's the bedlam about?" asked Ginny, coming inside the room, stifling a yawn.

"O.W.L results, dumbo," said Ron.

"Not bad, you two, but you could have done better," said Hermione, trying hard not to disapprove.

"Oh, don't be such a killjoy, Hermione," Ron said pointedly.

Before they could start yelling at each other, Ginny provided a diversion by hugging Hermione and steering towards her the kitchen, talking non-stop about O.W.Ls. Harry couldn't help the smile spreading across his face, while Ron only shrugged and they both made for the kitchen, as well.

Breakfast that day turned into a feast. Mrs. Weasley was as pleased as a songbird in spring.

"I knew about Hermione from the start, but you two still got eleven and ten O.W.Ls to boast about. Now that you've got the feel of it, I expect better for your N.E.W.Ts!" said Mrs. Weasley. "And I saw that Ron!" she finished, trying not to laugh. Ron had been trying to gag himself when Mrs. Weasley was not looking.

The main attraction of breakfast was Lupin emerging from the cellar, giving Mrs. Weasley quite a fright. He excused himself by saying that while he was Apparating from his room he became disoriented in the middle, but Harry knew better.

That evening, Harry tried his best to work out the diary again, but to no avail. He tried writing on it, but whenever he did, the ink just oozed out, like the pages were made of some plastic substance, though by the feel of them, the pages were still authentic paper. He tried Hermione's Revealer, but it didn't work either. After working on it for almost two hours, he chucked it back inside his trunk. Maybe this mystery would just have to remain unresolved for the time being.

-x.X.x-

### - CHAPTER 3 - The Unresolved Mysteries -

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Several days passed and there was a flurry of activities. Lupin was sent on some secret Order mission and Dumbledore was busy as well, so Harry was unable to tell anyone about his weird dream. He didn't discuss it with Hermione or Ron because he thought it to be useless, so he didn't let it bother him much.

July thirtieth was a normal day for him - chatting with friends, playing wizard's chess and Exploding Snap. As the time passed by in Grimmauld Place, he realized the fact that he was of no use, if he didn't let go of the past. Nothing would happen to Voldemort if he kept on brooding-Lupin was certainly right. He had to get a grip on himself. So, with the help of his friends, he was able to bury his feelings of self-loathing; he finally realized that he had to be strong for battling the unknown.

With the new perspective, he was able to see everyone in a new light-one person in particular: Ginny. She was not blushing or mooning over him anymore; instead, she had become confident and very easy to talk to. Harry couldn't understand it, but it was like he was seeing her for the first time. He noticed her hearty smile, which lightened up her face, so that she looked nothing but breathtaking, and it wasn't just her face but her vast knowledge of Quidditch, defensive spells, and hexes that sometimes he was amazed at how much talented she was. He remembered the twins' comment that, *"size is no guarantee of power, look at Ginny..."*

He was startled from his reverie by a loud crash and Sirius's mother's shrieks.

*"BLOOD TRAITORS! MUDBLOODS! DIRT! SCUM! MUTANTS! FEAKS! BE GONE from this place! How dare you befoul the house of my FORE-fathers, THE MOST NOBLE-"*

Mundungus had rung the bell again.

Mrs. Weasley came rushing out to stun the portrait. Harry and Ron came running to talk to 'Dung' but Harry got a jolt in between.

Sirius's mother gave another blood curdling scream and continued, "YOU! YOUUU, THE HALF-BLOOD SCUM, SPAWN OF FILTH! DOWNFALL OF MY DYNASTY-"

With the help of Dung, Mrs. Weasley was able to stun the portrait to silence.

"What was all that about..." said Harry, smiling half-heartedly

"Oh c'mon, Harry, everyone knows that she loves to make a racket," said Ginny, rolling her eyes.

They spent some time with Dung and found out his latest passion: quills. He had just bought a full batch of illegal quills-their specialty was writing swear words if they were left sitting idle, meaning: use it always or have your parchment and copies full of rude language. Harry thought this was a very dim-witted business deal, but didn't say so.

After dinner, they all went to their rooms. Ron told them that Charlie was due in London any day and he was doing some important stuff for the Order. They were in the process of figuring out what he could be doing.

"Maybe he is training dragons for the battle with V-v-v-You-Know-Who," suggested Ron.

Hermione rolled her eyes and Harry gave his friend a smack on the head. "Say his name already!"

"I will, mate, I will," said Ron with a sheepish smile.

"Hey, Hermione, did you meet Winky or Dobby? They're working here, you know," Harry informed, remembering his late-night encounter with the elf.

"*Really!*" Hermione exclaimed, almost jumping out of her seat.

"Oh boy, here we go again," muttered Ron, and looked at Harry with a pained expression. Harry just realized what he had done and was in no mood to be lectured on the 'house-elf rights.'

He was mumbling, "Umm...err...erm..." when like a rush of wind Tonks came in the room, sporting a hairstyle just like... *his*?

"I never knew my puffed up hair was 'in'," said Harry, looking amused.

Tonks beamed at him and said, "Mrs. Weasley wants to talk to you."

Suddenly there was a scramble and everybody rushed towards the kitchen.

"Hey! Wait up; what's the hurry?" Harry shouted at the retreating figures of his friends. But nobody answered. "That was strange," he mumbled and made his way to the kitchen.

*Why was everything so dark?* He squinted in the darkness, trying to locate a switch when he almost lost his balance with the bellowed, "SURPRISE!"

The kitchen lights came blazing back and he couldn't help but gasp at the sight.

Enchanted confetti was showering them all and a banner with big golden letters read, "HAPPY BIRTHDAY HARRY". The banner was sporting a Gryffindor lion and a Golden Snitch, which was zooming in and out of the view. At the bottom of the banner in sparkling red letters was written, '16th Birthday.'

Almost everyone was present: the whole Weasley clan (except Charlie and Percy), Lupin, Tonks, Moody, Mundungus, and surprise of all, Dumbledore! Even Dobby and Winky were there.

Everyone wished him happy birthday with hugs and kisses. The most awkward moment was when Ginny came to wish him and she stopped mid hug or kiss-whichever she was planning to do-and shook his hand instead with a nervous grin. The most outrageous was Tonks' behavior when she stifled his breath by giving him a bear hug and a kiss-he could feel steam bellow from his ears as she squeezed him so hard. Even Dumbledore gave him an affectionate hug and a pat on the head.

At the corner table there was a mountain of presents. He was feeling totally exhilarated and was musing on the thought that he didn't even remember his own birthday!

The twins' special fireworks were gliding across the room. This looked like an updated version though, because they were not bothering people, and not writing rude words on the walls either.

To top it all off, the cake (shaped as a silver stag) came with everyone singing:

*Happy Birthday to you,  
Happy Birthday to you,  
Happy Birthday Dear Harry,  
Happy Birthday to you!*

Fred and George were doing a weird jig in the background with Ginny and Ron; the foursome started singing in unison:

*We wish you great happiness  
In everything you do,  
We hope you win the Quidditch Cup  
This term too.*

*Our Hero, bold and Valiant;  
We know you'll come through.  
With all your brilliance  
You'll conquer You-Know-Who!*

*Conquer You-Know-Who!  
**SAY IT!**(Screamed by George)  
Conquer You-Know-Who!*

Everybody laughed and clapped heartily. Harry was so over-whelmed that he didn't have words to utter his appreciation.

"Make a wish, Harry," Mrs. Weasley said affectionately, her eyes sparkling with unshed tears.

The cake was set in front of him so that he could blow out the sixteen enchanted candles that were flickering on top of it. Everyone's face



swam in front of his eyes, all smiling at him, and just behind Tonks he saw Sirius... The knife Harry held in his hand clanged to the floor and a sudden hush engulfed the room.

In the blink of an eye, Sirius was gone. He was there and then he wasn't.

Tonks also followed Harry's stare, but there was no one to look at. Was it really Sirius, or was his mind playing tricks on him again?

"Moody, is there someone here wearing an invisibility cloak?" asked Harry.

"No, there isn't," said Moody, surveying the whole room and beyond.

"What's the matter, Harry?" asked Dumbledore.

"Oh, nothing, I thought I saw someone, that's all," Harry said apprehensively.

Nobody asked him anything, but almost everybody guessed who that could be. Bill scooped up the knife and handed it back to Harry. He blew out the candles wishing that for once and for all he could know, *really know*, about his parents and godfather. Not some secondary information, but first hand. He wished he could work out the diary, and soon.

Everything went normally after that; the party picked up and the fireworks went on with their toil. Harry's dark mood lifted, but he couldn't stop thinking about that flash or vision-whatever it was-of Sirius. Still, he had to behave like nothing was the matter.

He found an opportune moment and cornered Dumbledore. He told him the whole dream, along with a description of the shimmering light and voices.

Dumbledore looked at him thoughtfully and asked, "Are you sure that you weren't able to see anything? You only heard voices?"

"No, I couldn't see anything," Harry affirmed. "Was it Voldemort? I mean, is he again transmitting images to me?"

"No, I don't think so, Harry, this is different... I'm not sure, but you don't have to worry; it will become clearer with time. As you will be learning Occlumency this term, and in due time Legilimency as well. I don't see anything to worry about, just yet." Dumbledore finished and clinked his goblet for drawing the attention of the gathered crowd.

"May I have your attention please? I think a toast is in order. Today, Harry has turned sixteen, a very important and tender age." The headmaster gave Harry a twinkling glance. "His parents would have been very proud of him. He has proven himself time and time again against Voldemort and has lost more than blood and energy. And I dare say that there is still more to come, maybe more terrible than before, but, Harry, you are not alone and never will be. We all are with you, including your parents and Sirius-maybe not in material form, but still, we hope the very best for you... always. Cheers!"

Fifteen goblets were raised for him and the feeling of warmth and love in the room almost swept him away.

After many toasts, ended by a hiccupping Dung, who almost passed out because of the effort, Harry opened his gifts and thanked them all profusely.

Mr. and Mrs. Weasley gave him a bag full of Bertie Botts Every Flavor Beans, along with a book called *Advanced Defensive Spells-by Samuel T. Colderidge*; Bill gave him a wand maintenance kit; Fred and George gave him a jacket made up of dragon hide; Ron gave him different flavors of Honeydukes' chocolate and a bag full of skiving snack boxes and Hermione gave him a neat diary of DA classes, in which every spell they had already learned were recorded along with a list of the new spells they would learn in the coming term; Ginny gave him a book on Quidditch maneuvers; Dung gave him a cauldron-which Harry suspected was one of last year's stolen ones; Tonks gave him a bag full of chocolate frogs and *Weird Sister's* records which were self-playable; Moody gave him an extra-sensitive foe-glass; Lupin gave him a two way mirror just like Sirius's; Hagrid sent him a Revealer and a bunch of rock cakes; and Dumbledore gave him a shining orangish-red orb, just like a rememberall, with the instructions to, "Use it when in in grave danger and no way out."

It was almost four in the morning when people started clearing off. Harry and Ron made their way to their room, but before sleeping, Ron extracted another gift from his trunk and gave it to him, saying it was from Percy.

"But why-" Harry began, only to be cut off by Ron.

"You know, because of Dad. He didn't want to make a scene," he said, rolling his eyes.

There was a letter along with a hurriedly wrapped gift-a fancy set of quills.

*Dear Harry,*

*I hope I find you well?*

*I am very sorry for my behavior last year; it was selfish of me. I couldn't see straight when the Minister offered me a job as his assistant. I just accepted whatever he said. However now I know that You-Know-Who is still at large and I was very short-sighted, just like I was with Crouch.*

*I don't know what got into me, insulting my parents. Well, in a way I have received my punishment. ("Screwed up again, more like," piped up Ron, referring to his break-up with Penelope.) Please accept my condolences for Sirius's demise. I never actually knew him, but I am sure that he cared about you.*

*As I know that my family, my father in particular, is very close to you, could you possibly talk to them about accepting me? But it's no obligation, I'll not mind if you don't. (Ron snorted. "Who cares what he'll think!")*

*I again apologize for my behavior and hope you like my gift (these quills do not need ink to write; they are enchanted to write for almost forever without refilling).*

*Sincerely Yours,*

*Percy.*

"Couldn't help boasting, could he? He's still a brainless git," said Ron exasperatedly.

"Well, at least he's trying," said Harry, shrugging.

-

They were awakened by Lupin the next day. Their supply list had arrived and for a change they were all going to Diagon Alley with Mrs. Weasley and Lupin by Floo Powder. Incidentally, *Advanced Defensive spells* was on the list as the new Defense Against the Dark Arts book. There was also *The Standard Book of Spells: Grade Six* and a new book on Transfiguration.

After breakfast, they all got ready and one by one made their way to Diagon Alley by flooing through the fireplace of Grimmauld Place, and this time Harry pronounced it right, to his relief.

Like always, Diagon Alley was full of witches and wizards of all shapes and sizes and everything magical. Grown ups zipped in and out of the shops in a hurry while the kids and teens gawked at different displays of the numerous shops offering almost everything imaginable.

Harry and company went to Gringotts first. This was the first time that Harry didn't feel uncomfortable with his increased fortune. With twins' earnings, the Weasleys were not poor anymore, and to Harry no one in the whole wide world deserved wealth more than the Weasleys. This was also the first time that the Weasleys bought everything new, no hand-me-downs. Mrs. Weasley was very cheerful and Ron couldn't wipe the grin off his face.

They were making their way to number ninety-three, when the boys stopped in front of *Quality Quidditch Supplies* to goggle at the new *Nimbus 2003*, and Harry saw someone very familiar in the shop; it was Cho, buying a new broomstick.

Harry caught Ron's sleeve and almost whisked him inside the nearest alleyway and hid behind the crates. What they didn't expect was that there were three people just beyond the crates, hidden from view, scheming Harry's death.

"What's up, mate?" asked Ron, and was instantly shushed by Harry.

"Father will soon join us-without Dementors, the stupid Ministry officials can't hold them back for long. Don't worry, Crabbe, Goyle, both your fathers will snatch the opportunity as well. The Dark Lord needs his men now more than ever, and nobody can stop him when *he* wants something," said a very arrogant voice, belonging to Harry's old time nemesis: Draco Malfoy.

"That Potter!" he continued, "I will kill him myself this term; I've tolerated him long enough. That sneaky little ba-"

Crabbe mumbled, "Kill him, but how? And with Dumbledore around..."

Harry thought that this was the most intelligent question ever asked by Crabbe to date.

"Haven't I mentioned that already, Crabbe? I have been trained by Bellatrix all this summer. I have learned *Avada Kedavra*... and so much more," Draco said smugly.

Ron's eyes were popping and Harry could guess from the silence that both Crabbe and Goyle must be gaping at Malfoy.

"Oh, that Potter won't know what hit him... and if he is able to survive, there are so many other things to keep him busy, oh so many more," Malfoy continued gleefully, "I'd love to try *Avada Kedavra* on that Mudblood, Miss *Know-It-All* Granger-she is such a pain in the-"

Ron started flailing his arms with anger and Harry whispered, "Shut it, Ron! Let's get out of here!" Grabbing his arm, he made his way out of the alley as silently as possible.

They surveyed the mouth of the alleyway for a little while but the three in question didn't show up, so Harry and Ron concluded that Malfoy and his cronies were unaware of their presence.

"What took you so long?" asked Hermione when they entered number ninety-three.

"Later," said Harry and Ron in unison.

The shop was full of many familiar faces from Hogwarts. Everything on display sold like hot cakes and a very long waiting list was hung in the corner for different products; it was magically elongating by the second as new names kept being added to the list. *Vanishing Hydras* were on display along with the Headless hats.

Harry was not very surprised to see Lee Jordan behind the counter, as he was bound to work with the twins. At that exact moment, Lee noticed Harry and yelled a big, "How are you, Harry?" which almost reverberated in the shop because of the sudden silence.

Many heads turned in his direction and the usual murmuring started. A middle-aged witch wearing a weird pointy hat came towards him and shook his hand.

"Finally! It was so brave of you to warn everybody of You-Know-Who. I always believed you, you know," she said, smiling at him. "I am Dederot Schloper, very pleased to meet you."

Harry, taken by surprise, managed a, "Thank you."

Now everyone was watching him. Some were smiling and some were just staring like he was a newly found species of basilisk. There was a lot of muttering and whispering going about, when Fred signaled to his mother and Mrs. Weasley shooed them inside the private room of the store and out of the prying eyes.

Harry looked around and saw a very comfortable and cozy living room. He was completely captivated by a painting of a very beautiful red-haired witch who was sitting on a rock looking glum, twirling her wand in her hand.

Ginny, following his gaze, informed him, "She's our great-great grandmother. She is sad because of our great-great grandfather. They loved each other deeply, but then he participated in the war with the Trolls and was killed. She waited for him for about three months after the war ended, sitting on the same rock you are seeing in the portrait, without eating anything, and when the news of his death came on Halloween, she performed some kind of hex on herself and evaporated on the spot-but legend has it that on every Halloween night she appears beside the rock and sits there crying."

Hermione gasped and Harry just stared at the witch.

"Yeah, real creepy... I heard that she was a very powerful witch," provided Ron, looking mystified.

"Yes, she was, that's why nobody knows what spell she did to commit suicide, or even whether she has really died or not. And the most amazing thing is that she never leaves the portrait except on Halloween nights-she's never here on Halloween," said Mrs. Weasley, thoughtfully.

"Yes, I have heard about her. Ursula Weasley, is it not?" asked Lupin, to which Mrs. Weasley nodded.

"Where is this place?" asked Harry, pointing to the surroundings of the portrait.

"It's a small wizard town called *Iridese* situated on a small island known as Boaz," said Mrs. Weasley. Looking at the time, she said, "Well, anyway let's go back, we are already late."

Harry was so deep in thought on his way back from Diagon Alley that he swallowed a lot of soot and came out coughing from the fireplace. Mrs. Weasley came hurrying with a clean cloth to wipe his face and cloak and Harry went redder with every rub, saying in muffled voice, "It's alright Mrs. Weasley, I'll clean it."

Ron snickered gleefully in the background, while Hermione and Ginny didn't do that well in the keeping-a-straight face department either. After Harry had been rubbed raw, he made his way to his room, his face flaming like a ripe tomato.

"Oh shut up, Ron!" said Harry, irritated at his friend's chuckles, but was distracted by too much hooting. Pig was going wild, going round and round in their room. Hedwig was awake and glaring coldly at Pig.

"Hey, why haven't I noticed Pig before? Wasn't he here?" asked Harry, confused.

"No, he wasn't, you couldn't ever miss his stupid, weeny, hooting face anyway, could you? Always showing off!" said Ron, snatching Pig in his hands and taking off his load, which was a letter from Charlie.

"He was with Charlie all along. He wanted him for speedy communication, whatever *that* meant," Ron said indignantly. "And I was only too happy, not to reject the offer."

Ron read the letter, sent Ginny to pass it on to his mother, and informed everybody that Charlie was expected next week.

"So, now can you tell me what took you so long in Diagon Alley?" asked Hermione.

"Oh yeah, we had a little rendezvous with dear Draco," Ron said, rolling his eyes, and explained in detail with Harry's assistance, the whole conversation, eliminating Hermione's part marvelously.

"*He's learned Avada Kedavra?*" said Hermione, horror struck. "He must have learned the Cruciatus and Imperius Curses as well..."

"Don't count on it," interjected Ron.

"Harry, this isn't good... what if he gets you mad and leads you off somewhere, and- and-" Hermione stuttered.

"Kills me?" Harry provided skeptically. "Hermione, you should know better. I can take care of dear Draco-he will just need to come within an inch of me and I'll hex his pointy face to hell!"

"Oh yes," Ron said with a dreamy expression just like the one he had when Moody transfigured Draco into a ferret in their fourth year.

"We have to inform Dumbledore!" insisted Hermione. "What if he catches you at a bad moment?"

"Oh don't fret, Hermione, Harry can take care of himself," said Ron confidently.

"You don't know that! There can be so many situations and..." Hermione continued, and the bickering started. It was so long that



everybody forgot the topic of the fight along with Ron and Hermione, who went back to their usual quarreling selves.

Both were biting each other's head off and Harry and Ginny were looking to and fro as the argument got more intense. And at the same moment each caught the other's eye and burst into giggles. This sound brought the other two back from the pit of wrangle-land to reality, making Ron and Hermione act civilly again.

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The days almost flew by, and thirty-one August came in a whirlwind. Lupin was popping all over the house to check and double-check for stray items. In between, Winky made a brief appearance during which she was bombarded with questions from Hermione. It appeared that she had improved a lot in two years. Check - she was not clutching a butterbeer in her hand. Check - she was dressed very smartly for an elf and (check) she was talking very politely and doing a lot of curtsying. Dobby was very protective of her and started wiggling his ears madly whenever Hermione asked her a difficult question about the elf status.

Ron was looking very amused indeed by the whole proceedings, and when the two house-elves left the room hand in hand, Ron couldn't help but say, "Made for each other!"

They all burst into laughter, like they were just waiting for his cue.

When everything was packed, they all filed towards the kitchen for dinner, and the only uncharacteristic thing about the dinner was Crookshanks' peculiar behavior when he ran for the pantry, his teeth bared and tail in the air. Lupin was the one who went for further investigation and found nothing unusual. But Crookshanks kept on patrolling the whole house after that, like he was trying to find something.

In the morning, they ate breakfast in a hurry and started loading luggage into the Ministry-sent cars. This year, the Ministry was more than ready to cooperate. Fred and George also came to see them off, along with Tonks, Lupin, Moody, and Mr. and Mrs. Weasley. Moody was beside himself, grinning broadly, and growling now and then to

anybody who cared to listen, "The more there are, the merrier the guard will be."

Like always, they became late, but with some special features used by the Ministry cars, they were able to reach King's Cross at fifty past ten. They unloaded in a hurry and headed for Platform Nine and Three Quarters. In pairs, they went through the barrier. Harry was the second to last to enter, followed by Moody and Lupin. But as soon as Harry entered the platform, he was forced to duck by Tonks, as a stunning spell shot past them.

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## - CHAPTER 4 - Platform Under Siege -

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It was a scene of large scale pandemonium. Everyone was running hither and thither, and there were three Dark Marks in the air above the scarlet Hogwarts Express. In the frenzy of confusion, Harry could make out about fifteen to twenty Death Eaters, all of whom had their wands out and were either cursing Unforgivables or stunning people all over the place.

Lupin and Moody had Harry covered for the moment, but almost ten of the Death Eaters were heading in his direction. He couldn't see Ron, Hermione or Ginny from where he was, but all the others were fighting the Death Eaters very bravely. Because of their masks, Harry didn't recognize any of the Death Eaters.

He was just craning his neck to see the other side of the platform when Moody growled, "Get down boy!" in a manner not unlike Uncle Vernon, while a Binding Spell shot past him.

He could hear people scream over the melee and something inside him came alive. He didn't want to hide behind anyone anymore. He closed his eyes in resolve as he was again made to crouch beside Lupin.

"No," said Harry.

"Did you say something, Harry?" Lupin inquired, yelling over the hubbub.

"I said: *No!*" He had had enough, period.

Drawing his wand out, Harry stood up, ready for anything unexpected, while the ten Death Eaters coming in their direction occupied Lupin's and Moody's full attention. One of them tried to hex Lupin from behind, but Harry bellowed, "*Expelliarmus!*"

The Death Eater's wand was still in the air when Harry yelled, "*Stupefy!*"

After that there was no looking back. Harry recalled everything from DA classes and got to work. Any enemy who came across his path

was blasted out of the way. A feeling of utter loathing was sweeping through his body, and his wand was almost quivering with the urge to wipe out the creatures behind the swishing black cloaks and grotesque masks.

He was amazed that he wasn't the main target, as the majority of the Death Eaters were assaulting Hogwarts students and their parents.

Harry had just Confounded a Death Eater when all the action halted abruptly.

There was a sudden commotion at the right side of the platform. Wind started swirling like a vortex and a portal opened with such force that it sucked the surrounding benches into its core.

Even the Death Eaters stopped to see what was happening. The portal was growing into a huge black hole, sucking in everything from trunks to paper to benches. One of the nearest Death Eaters was sucked into it and his screams of terror made people more frantic. In an instant, all the remaining Death Eaters chickened out and ran through the barrier. When a wizard near the barrier tried the same, he crashed against the wall.

*The Death Eaters must have sealed the barrier,* Harry thought warily.

The panic was on fever pitch as the magical folk scrambled together for finding a shelter of any kind. They helped each other along as best as they could, even though it was quite difficult to move. The wind around them was swirling like a hurricane and everybody was hanging on to something for support. Harry was gripping the nearest pole and his eyes were barely open, because of the wind but his scar was searing with pain and he couldn't hold on to the pole much longer.

In a blurry haze, he saw a golden light spark and had to force his eyes open against the gust to see Dumbledore materializing on the platform with Fawkes.

Dumbledore was chanting a strange incantation and swirling his wand in a complicated movement. The gaping mouth of the portal

closed as suddenly as it had opened and everybody thudded to the ground.

Lupin steadied Harry and rearranged his glasses, which were askew. Harry glanced around and saw to his horror that many students and their relatives were injured. Some of the bodies were totally motionless. His heart and scar gave an alarming throb as he hurried off to find his friends.

He expected the worst, not because he was a pessimist, but because sudden death was not new to him. It had just been a few seconds and Sirius was gone. It had probably taken less than a minute for Peter Pettigrew to betray his parents to their deaths. Death didn't walk around with a count-down sign. It didn't stop for anyone, and Harry seemed to have a knack for losing those close to him.

So it was with utter dread in his heart that he scanned the battered faces of the wizards and witches surrounding him. He met a very bloody-nosed Seamus who pointed towards his left and Harry felt relief shower over him when he saw Ron and Hermione being led to a bench by Fred and George.

"Are you guys all right?" he asked, panic still streaking his voice.

"Bloody fine, mate," said Ron in a funny voice, spitting out a tooth. George handed him a handkerchief to wipe his bleeding lip.

Hermione had tried to stand up but with a stifled scream she sat right back down, looking at Harry with pained eyes. Harry knew that the expression in her eyes was not because of her sprained ankle, but because she was feeling the same spell of helplessness as he was.

Harry moved on to find Ginny with Mr. Weasley, who was supporting her right arm; the odd angle of the hand made him guess that it was broken. He saw Luna jostling a dazed Neville, Mrs. Weasley was tending to Tonks, and Moody was wiping his magical eye. Harry was relieved beyond words to see them all well.

Healers and many other officials bearing the sign of Ministry on their cloaks started appearing on the platform in groups, holding Portkeys.

Seriously injured people were given Portkeys to St. Mungo's and small injuries were mended by the Healers on the spot.

Harry went to Dumbledore, but was grabbed by Lupin in midway. "Talk to him later, he's busy."

Harry looked over at the headmaster and saw that he was talking to a tall, foreign-looking wizard with a thick mop of short black hair and a neat beard. His face was set in a grim expression and the way he was talking to Dumbledore, Harry guessed that he knew him well. Harry looked for a Ministry emblem but found none on his dark brown traveling cloak.

"What was all that?" asked Fred, looking disheveled, and voicing Harry's own thoughts.

"I don't know, looked like the work of Death Eaters, but that gateway... I couldn't understand..." said Lupin worriedly, while Harry and Fred shared dark looks.

Harry's attention was diverted by the sound of a woman crying; she was clutching a young girl and was weeping all over her.

"Lupin... is that girl d- dead?" Harry stuttered, looking at Lupin and hoping he'd say no. Lupin just nodded.

That girl was not the only one, there were more casualties. The whole platform was cluttered with strewn luggage, books, wooden shards and animal feathers. Owls were hooting indignantly, cats of all sizes and colors were cowering in available corners, and some occasional frogs were jumping and croaking timidly. Some animals were even injured because of their cages, which had toppled off during the brief whirlwind.

Harry was looking for Hedwig, when she flew over to him, sat on his shoulder, and gave him an affectionate nip on the ear. He gladly accepted the warm, feathery comfort against his face.

It was half-past eleven, and this was probably the first time in history that the Hogwarts Express didn't leave the platform at eleven o'clock sharp.

Harry was still surveying the whole scene, shocked, when Ron, Hermione and Ginny caught up with him after getting patched up by the Healers.

Hermione said in a very shaky voice, "Did you see her? She was sorted last year in front of us, and now..."

*Innocent people got killed because Voldemort thought it was much fun?* Harry was now able to discern a little, the terror of the days when Voldemort was in power last time.

*But killing school children? What was the use of that? What could he think to gain from murdering small children?*

Ginny was unnerved too. She said, glancing around, "Let's help people who are injured, give the Healers a hand..." They all nodded in unison and went to work.

Lupin, Moody and Mrs. Weasley headed towards the Ministry officials and Mr. Weasley joined the foreign-looking wizard.

A small boy went running past them crying, "Mum, mummy!"

Hermione calmed him down and asked him, "where his mummy was", and he answered that he got lost. Hermione was tending him when a haggard-looking wizard came running for him and thanked all of them for taking care of his child.

Harry remembered his parent's sacrifice, his mother's cry of pain ("*not Harry...*"), then Cedric, falling to the ground without a clue why he was being killed... and Sirius, mocking Bellatrix in the Death Chamber... He was young again in that moment, not the wary, escaped criminal from Azkaban, but a man full of youth, like he was in the picture of his parent's wedding: smiling, laughing-replaced by shock in the moment when he disappeared behind the veil...

Harry could almost see it again, hear his mother's voice in his head, the cold voice of Voldemort saying, "*Kill the spare.*"

Eyes glazed, Harry began unconsciously trembling with rage. *Why? Why, why, why? How could anyone want this? What did anybody do*

*to deserve such treatment? What could drive Voldemort to do this?  
There was no call for it!*

The platform was stained with innocent blood and Harry couldn't do anything about it. His hatred for Voldemort solidified. He couldn't let these deaths go unpunished, unchallenged, un-repaid. The creature who was responsible should suffer, and Harry would see to it himself!

"Harry, what's the matter?" Hermione asked in a terrified voice.

"What," Harry said vaguely. "What!" he repeated, jerking out of his reverie to see his friends looking at him concernedly.

"You were giving off a golden glow just now," said Ginny in a worried voice.

"I was? I... I was?" finished Harry, rather surprised.

"May I have your attention please?" said the quietly authoritative voice of Dumbledore. Everyone fell silent.

"Today's incident was, though not predictable, inevitable. We all know its origin and I'm afraid to say that this will not be the last event of this nature. We have lost innocent lives today, and I am most aggrieved. But it will not go wasted, because evil cannot prevail. We have to be watchful and cautious in everything we do, because the Death Eaters have infiltrated everything." Dumbledore paused for the news to sink in.

"We have to look beyond our differences and unite under the flag of peace." He glared at everybody at this point and Harry again felt the same intense power emanating from Dumbledore that made it understandable to all present that he was the only wizard Voldemort would fear.

"The Hogwarts Express will leave at two o'clock sharp. For the time being, the platform has been enlarged and a makeshift camp has been erected on the left side of the platform. Rest there till two, so that the Ministry officials from the Department of Magical Accidents and Catastrophes can clear the platform and take care of the



students who have been injured. Hopefully, they will be able to join all the others on the journey to Hogwarts."

Harry noticed a photographer clicking away pictures of the scene and some reporters were preparing to question the people present. It seemed that Dumbledore had just noticed them too, because he magnified his voice again and said, "I would request that the reporters not to harass the parents, as well the students. You will all get your questions answered in a peaceful manner at the Department of Magical Law Enforcement."

According to Harry, that was a very polite way of saying, 'Clear off!'

They went on with their work. Fred, George, Luna, Neville, Dean and Seamus also joined them in assisting the Ministry workers in clearing up the platform.

Neville asked, "Did you all use magic when the Death Eaters were here?"

They all nodded in assent. "Codswallop! I thought I was going to get in trouble-Gran would have had me," said Neville nervously.

Harry too was astonished that nobody got an owl from the Ministry. They would have loved to expel Harry from Hogwarts last year, but he supposed that now the situation was different. Now the Ministry believed him and he was 'The-Boy-Who-Lived' again, he contemplated scornfully.

At half-past one, the platform was back to normal again except for the makeshift camp where people were resting. Their luggage was repaired and arranged in a line. Harry saw an extra-clean cage of Hedwig beside his trunk. Some students were coming back from St. Mungo's and everyone was saying hi to everyone else.

It was like a grand family gathering, where everyone was meeting each other after a long time-except the Slytherins. They were huddled around Draco Malfoy. Harry was sorely tempted to let out some of his anger on Malfoy, but he knew better than to do anything with so many people around; he'd only get into trouble. But Draco could wait, and so could Harry.

Lupin, Moody, Tonks and Mrs. Weasley came to see them off. Mr. Weasley informed them that they'd soon get news about the day's events. "As if we need it," muttered Ron.

Lupin instructed Harry to use the mirror whenever he felt like it.

Lupin was looking very strained, and it was not just him. They were all looking worried; Moody in particular, advised him to keep his nose clean and not to do anything rash. Harry could only grimace at Moody's choice of words.

After they got their last hugs from Mrs. Weasley and Tonks, they all filed inside the Hogwarts Express and sat in the same compartment with Luna, Neville, Dean and Seamus.

Ron was the first one to speak his mind. "Did anybody else notice that all the Slytherins are unharmed? They were all hiding inside the Express when the gateway opened. The Slytherins should be chucked out of Hogwarts and sent to that Durmstrang lot," he finished angrily. Harry was expecting some retaliation from Hermione, but she didn't say anything. She just sat there with a distant expression on her face.

Then Dean very hesitantly asked, "Do you blokes know how many people died?"

"No idea, but I saw a seventh year Ravenclaw on a stretcher to St. Mungo's," said Luna in a very dreamy voice, but there was no *Quibbler* in her hand for company and she looked quite sad. Harry could understand-looking death in the eyes was not very pleasant, even if it wasn't for the first time.

"And what about that hole that opened up?" Seamus wondered aloud.

"Seemed like a *chade* to me," Luna said gloomily.

"A what?" Hermione raised her eyebrow while the rest of them tuned in with mild interest.

"Well, you know, a bottomless pit that sucks everything to its core and sends them off in another dimension and time."

Hermione opened and closed her mouth but didn't say anything, while Luna, with unperturbed ease, continued. "There have been reports that people happen upon such portals and come back to their time after years and find their relatives either awfully old or even dead."

"And you read this in *Quibbler*?" asked Hermione.

"Of course," said Luna serenely, while Hermione stared around the group as if proving her point.

Harry knew that Hermione never believed in whatever Luna said and he admitted that half of the things that Luna had told them turned out to be over-exaggerations but some of the things that she had said last year sure rang a bell, including seeing the Thestrals. Harry clearly remembered his last conversation with Luna before the end of last term.

*"Oh, come on. You heard them, just behind the veil...In that room with the archway. They were just lurking out of sight, that's all. You heard them..."*

He had thought about these words a thousand times during these particular holidays. He had contemplated millions of ways for his godfather's return. Harry would have given anything to have Sirius back, but he somehow knew that his godfather was in a place from where he couldn't return. But maybe there was a clue in-

His thoughts were abruptly disturbed by the entry of Draco Malfoy. Before Harry had a chance to move, half of the compartment had their wands out and were glaring challengingly at the intruder.

"Ho hum," Draco murmured annoyingly at them, his pristine smirk in place.

"What do you want, Malfoy?" said Harry fiercely.

"Your head on a silver platter, Potter," Draco replied nattily.

"Make one more move and you wouldn't grin all your life, Malfoy," Ron said aggressively, taking out a Hydra from his bag so swiftly that

if Hermione hadn't grabbed his arm, he would have slung it pell-mell towards Malfoy.

"No need to be so hostile, *Weasley*. I was just here to tell you about the Prefect's Meeting," said Malfoy, with faint solemnity.

Hermione narrowed her eyes suspiciously and Ron gave him an oblivious look.

Harry wasn't sure what his nemesis was trying to pull, when he perfectly knew his intentions of ridding the world of his existence-what he had already so eloquently expressed in a dark alleyway of Diagon Alley.

"Chaperon are you now, Malfoy?" Harry inquired skeptically.

"I would die before chaperoning a Mudblood and a Weasel!" Malfoy sneered and quickly made for the compartment door before anybody could hex him.

"What was all that about?" Neville asked, bewildered.

"Why was he even here?" said Ron, using the same tone of bewilderment.

"Maybe he was just here to see if any of us got really injured or something, as he was hiding in the train when all that happened. He would have loved it if you dropped dead," said Ginny matter-of-factly, looking straight at Harry.

There were murmurs of agreement and knowing smiles around the group.

Ron and Hermione soon excused themselves to the Prefects compartment and promised to return as early as possible.

Nobody had the nerve to check to see who was missing. They all just sat there, lost in their own thoughts, paying a silent tribute to the lives lost.

When Ron and Hermione came back in an hour they were looking more glum than usual, as if they were trying to hide something but couldn't. Harry didn't press-he didn't want to start a mass panic.

Was this the way it all began? Striking when nobody was expecting it? Frightening everybody, killing the innocent, having the upper hand? It all seemed so hopeless. But then he remembered Dumbledore's words... *"Evil cannot prevail!"*

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## - CHAPTER 5 - The Sorting Ceremony -

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At half past ten, they reached Hogwarts and when they disembarked, they heard, much to their relief, Hagrid's booming voice in the station, "Firs'-years! Firs'-years! Over 'ere, c'mon now, firs'-years..."

"At least something is normal," Harry said in a relieved voice.

"Alrigh' there, Harry?" asked Hagrid. Harry gave him a grimacing smile and a wave. All of the others did the same with varying degrees of cheerfulness.

"Where do you reckon that pointy face is?" said Ron, surveying the crowd. "Must have chickened out to the first available carriage," he added, answering his own question.

Harry was in no mood to discuss anything—he was much too exhausted—so, he stayed silent. As they walked towards the nearest carriage, Harry couldn't help but ask, "Can any of you see the Thestrals now?"

"I can," Hermione said in a small squeaky voice. From the looks of it, Hermione was on the verge of tears, so nobody pressed the matter. They all sat in silence for the duration of the carriage ride. Harry felt as delighted as always to return to Hogwarts, but the beginning of this term was not what he had expected.

They made their way to the Great Hall and noticed no extra welcome-back-to-school decorations. Everything was very subdued, and instead of the House banners, the walls were sporting black banners except four small House banners above each House table, just like in their fourth year.

They all sat down at their respective House tables and Professor McGonagall entered the hall carrying a stool and the Sorting Hat with the extra anxious-looking first years in tow. They were all staring at the Sorting Hat when the brim of the Hat opened like a mouth and started singing:

*Things are not always what they seem  
'Cause I'm more than what you see-*

*Don't presuppose I'm just a hat,  
I'm brainier than the firstees!*

*A thousand years I've sat here,  
Grasping all your interests and strengths;  
Taking a peek inside your head  
And sorting you in the end.*

*You may belong in Gryffindor  
If you are gallant, brave and daring,  
Or you may be a Slytherin  
If you are wily, sly and cunning,*

*You may belong in Ravenclaw  
If you are clever, smart, and bright,  
Or perhaps may be a Hufflepuff  
If you are loyal and justice is your fight.*

*Now heed me well,  
I tell you no lies,  
There are difficult times ahead,  
When friendships will be tested,  
And loyalties double-checked.  
But if you stay true to your heart,  
You'll never fail or be dissuaded.*

*So don't fret so much,  
I'll not take long.  
Just put me on and hold  
and let the Sorting now unfold!*

There was scattered clapping - not so lively, but still...

Professor McGonagall started calling out names.

"Alfred, Mitch!"

"Ravenclaw!"

"Brad, Ryan!"

"Gryffindor!"

Gryffindors clapped half-heartedly for Ryan Brad, who came tripping towards them.

"Ira, Tora!"

"SLYTHERIN!"

"Johnson, Tara!"

"GRYFFINDOR!"

"Hey, did you see Cho?" asked Ron. Harry followed his gaze and saw her with her stupid blabbing friend, Marietta. Michael Corner was trying to talk to Cho, but either she wasn't listening, or was completely ignoring him.

"Price, Felix!"

"SLYTHERIN!"

"Trip, Arek!"

"HUFFLEPUFF!"

"Wallace, Tina!"

"GRYFFINDOR!"

Harry observed the staff table. There was no new face, but a chair was empty beside Professor Flitwick. *So who would it be this time?* Or may be Dumbledore wasn't able to find a teacher this year...

"Zoldo, Brian!"

"RAVENCLAW!"

When the sorting ended, Dumbledore said only two words: "Tuck in."

The plates filled with food and even when most of them hadn't eaten much on their way to Hogwarts, nobody attacked the food as they



always did. Ron was not grabbing everything in sight and Hermione was just playing with her food. Harry was looking at Ginny when he was almost knocked off his seat by a slap on his back. Jack Sloper was grinning at him stupidly.

"McGonagall has asked me to tell you that you are suppose to meet her tomorrow morning at half past ten, in her office."

"What for?" he asked, to which Jack only shrugged. Harry couldn't think of anything fascinating about his meeting with the Deputy Headmistress.

At last the food disappeared and there was a palpable hush in the Great Hall-everyone was looking at Dumbledore when he stood up.

"This term has begun on a sad note. Some of our own were lost today in an attack on Platform Nine and Three Quarters by the followers of Voldemort"-the usual shudders followed-"known as Death Eaters. We will always remember the innocent lives that were lost this morning." Dumbledore bowed his head and paused.

"Because of this unfortunate delay, the term will officially begin on September third. You all have a whole day free tomorrow. I know that you wouldn't forget what happened today, and it's not wise to forget either. Remember that all your fellows passed on fighting, not cowering in the corner." After another slight pause, he continued to the usual notices, "As always, the Forbidden Forest is out of bounds for all the students"-his gaze lingered on Harry and company-"and Mr. Filch has requested me to inform you that no magic is allowed in corridors between classes and the items not permitted inside the Castle has been increased to nine hundred and ninety-three which may be checked by the list on Mr. Filch's office door. We again have a change in staffing this year. The new teacher of Defense Against the Dark Arts is Professor Tarziah Vidal, who will join us tomorrow... All of you had enough for a day, so make your way to your dormitories."

"Who's Vidal?" inquired Neville, as they started to fill out of the hall.

"I dunno... but it sure rings a bell," said Ron, scratching his head.

Hermione started calling for the first years and Ron followed. The first years all formed a haphazard line and headed towards Gryffindor Tower. Harry said, "Night," to Ron and Hermione, and made his way alone through the usual secret passages and reached the portrait of the Fat Lady, who was gossiping with her friend Vi.

"Password?" she asked.

"Tritenzy."

The portrait swung open and Harry went straight to his room, changed, and went to sleep.

-X-

Next morning most of them were eagerly awaiting the owl post, as many of them had subscribed to the *Daily Prophet* and were keen on getting the news about yesterday's events. When the post arrived, Hermione and Harry both lunged towards their *Daily Prophet* carrying owls and started scanning the headlines with Ron and Ginny peering over their shoulders.

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<b>Mass</b>	<b>unrest</b>	<b>at</b>	<b>Platform</b>	<b>9</b>	<b><math>\frac{3}{4}</math></b>
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(This article was accompanied with a picture of a huge crowd in Diagon Alley carrying protest signs saying things like 'Ministry is lame', 'We want our friends back', 'Death Eaters should be torched!', 'Fudge an inept Minister?' and the like.)

*Numerous witches and wizards were injured and a few killed in the brutal attack by the Death Eaters at Platform Nine and Three Quarters yesterday. According to the released information by the Department of Magical Law Enforcement, almost forty-three people were injured, three of whom were injured fatally. Four Hogwarts students-Rose Zellers (second year), Alice Chaz (seventh year), Orla Crane (first year), Dennis Creevey (third year), and a witch named Adele Lorian were killed by the Death Eaters.*

Harry's and Ron's eyes popped out in shock and Hermione gave a muffled sob. Harry scanned the Gryffindor table for Collin, who was no where to be seen.

*Because of their masks, none of the witnesses were able to identify the Death Eaters. According to speculations, they may include the escaped Death Eaters who broke free from Azkaban last week. The Aurors are doing their best to trace them, but at the moment there is no information as to their whereabouts.*

*This event has started a mass panic across the wizarding world and there have been huge protests against the Ministry's failure to save these lives.*

*The appearance of the unidentified portal in the Platform is still a mystery. The experts consulted have no plausible explanation. However, Headmaster Dumbledore's nick-of-time arrival and his use of an advanced Sealing Charm saved many witches and wizards from the unknown horrors of the vacuum that sucked in luggage, pets and people.*

*"The correct safety measures weren't taken and after June events, the Ministry officials should have been more alert," claims a protestor.*

The article went on to quote many other Diagon Alley protestors. Harry flipped to the next article on the front page.

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# Mayhem at King's Cross

-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-

*The wizarding world faced a massive set-back when the Muggles witnessed Death Eaters in the flesh!*

*It was all over the Muggle news that the people traveling to different parts of the United Kingdom from King's Cross witnessed about twenty hooded people wearing strange cloaks and masks appear beside Platform Ten and then disappear into thin air. They all saw them Disapparate; the Muggle Prime Minister is furious at the Ministry's error of low security at Platform Nine and Three Quarters.*

*Muggles are drawing their own conclusions and are painting the Death Eaters as "**The Grim Reapers.**" They suppose that they belong to some occult group. The Muggle Government has declined comment.*

*For more read:  
Dumbledore's Statement (Page 2)  
The Mysterious Gateway-You-Know-Who's next ploy? (Page3)  
Why the Ministry failed (Page 4)  
Death Eaters-their past and present (Page 5 to 6)*

-x-X-x-

Harry, Ron, Ginny and Hermione simply looked at each other with pained expressions.

As an after-thought, Ron almost jumped and asked Hermione, "Did you see Dennis die?"

Hermione nodded, and Ginny gave a muffled sob and said, "He was so young and always so enthusiastic..."

"Where do you reckon Collin is? He must be awfully upset," said Ron.

Collin and Dennis Creevey were sometimes annoying, but Harry had never hated them. For Collin to lose his brother in such gruesome circumstances was really sad.

"Did anyone of you notice that none of the four students killed belonged to Slytherin?" said Ginny, with her eyebrows raised.

"Yeah! Rose Zellers was in Hufflepuff," said Ron.

"Alice Chaz was in Ravenclaw," said Luna, joining the Gryffindor table.

"Dennis was in Gryffindor and Orla Crane was unsorted, but was a Muggle-born," said Hermione worriedly.

They all looked over towards the Slytherin table. Almost every face was set in a smug expression like they didn't have a single worry in

the world. The new kids sorted into Slytherin House were being lectured by Pansy Parkinson, while Draco was nowhere to be seen.

Dean interrupted their observation and beckoned them all to the Entrance Hall. A whole corner of the hall was covered with banners of Hufflepuff, Ravenclaw and Gryffindor with the pictures of the students who passed away. Students were placing flowers and messages under their pictures; it was a kind of memorial for the departed souls.

All of them headed for the Green House to get some nice flowers when Hermione nudged Harry and said, "You were supposed to meet Professor McGonagall at ten thirty; its twenty-five past ten!"

"Whoa! I almost forgot. Should I join you in the common room?" Harry asked.

"By the lake would be much better," answered Luna.

"Okay," he said and sprinted off to McGonagall's office. He opened the office door, nursing a stitch in his side.

"Sorry, Professor, I got-" Harry broke off seeing Katie Bell in the office.

"Oh no matter, Potter. Sit down," McGonagall said, pointing towards the chair beside Katie.

"Am I in trouble?" Harry asked skeptically.

"No, Mr. Potter, you are not," replied McGonagall, with a hint of smile.

He sat down, relieved, and waited for McGonagall to speak, while exchanging inquisitive looks with Katie, who was grinning slightly.

"I know it's not the right time, but you two have been selected as the Captains of the Gryffindor Quidditch team."

Harry gave a start. *He? The team Captain?*

Katie beamed at Harry.

"This must be some mistake, Professor, I was banned from Quidditch and I didn't even play more than a match last year. I don't think that I have the right qualifica-"

"Potter, you should know better! Umbridge can't stop you from playing Quidditch-she's long gone and Dumbledore's back. So no rules cooked up by any temporary headmistress apply. And as for the right qualifications, with skills like yours... I don't think I have to explain your abilities to *you*, do I?" said McGonagall, flaring up.

"You two will co-captain the team. You two were chosen for your abilities and experience. So, I hope to see the Quidditch cup finding its way to my room *again*." McGonagall smiled at them knowingly.

"And now if you'll excuse me, Miss Bell, I have another urgent matter to discuss with Potter," McGonagall beckoned.

Katie departed by saying, "Thank you, Professor."

When Katie closed the office door behind her, McGonagall continued, "The second matter is that Dumbledore thinks you shouldn't only receive the school education, but something more, because of your future burden,"-her smile faltered a little bit-"So, Professor Lupin will be coming here twice a week to teach you advanced magic which will also help you in your future Auror training."

"Lupin! Wow, but"-Harry gave McGonagall a quizzical look-"I haven't got an 'O' in Potions. Snape-"

"Professor Snape for you," she interjected.

"Oh yeah... so, he won't take me for the N.E.W.Ts classes because I only got an 'E'. How can I continue Auror training then?"

"Well, fortunately for you, Potter, this year not many of the students got an 'O' in Potions. To be precise there are only two students who got an 'O' and they are Miss Granger and Mr. Malfoy."

**"DRACO MALFOY!"**

"Yes, Potter! And you don't have to be so loud," she barked at him. "So, as I was saying, Professor Snape can't teach only two students for N.E.W.Ts, so he's accepting the students who got an 'E' as well, which makes his class twenty three students healthier, and you to get back on track."

Harry smiled in relief. So he was not out of the game after all.

"And finally, your first Occlumency class will be held tomorrow, and Lupin will start his classes next month. And before you go... why don't you have a biscuit, Potter?"

-x-

After his meeting with McGonagall, Harry went straight to the Green House Four to pluck some roses and lilies. What he didn't know was that Cho was doing just the same thing at that exact moment. When he turned back from the spot from where he had plucked the last lily, he collided, shoulders-first with Cho.

There was a very big pause in between, in which Cho kept looking in Harry's eyes and Harry was too shaken to do anything otherwise.

She said a breathless, "Hi."

Harry only muttered, "Errr...hello." Then he shrugged and picked up his flowers, handed back the rest to Cho and walked as fast as his legs would carry him away from Green House Four-and away from Cho.

He returned to the Entrance Hall and placed his plucked flowers beside Dennis's picture and wrote a hurried message for the departed souls in a piece of parchment borrowed from a Gryffindor first year who kept gawking at him till he made his way to the lake.

When he reached their favorite beech tree, Harry informed Ron about their getting into Snape's class after all. Ron looked like he was going to whoop with joy but stopped in between and did a back flip of some sort.

"So, at least now we are safe till the N.E.W.Ts... but Draco getting an 'O', Merlin's beard! Slippery, Azkaban-escaping Daddy would be so proud!" Ron finished scathingly.

That night, after dinner, they were at last introduced to their new Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher, Tarziah Vidal, who was the foreign-looking wizard Harry had seen in Platform Nine and Three Quarters. When his appointment was announced he nodded to the students, smiling.

"I just hope he turns out all right," said Hermione apprehensively.

"I do too. It's a high time we got a decent Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher," said Ron decidedly.

-x-

He was staring at the picture of Ursula Weasley and she was as sad and glum as he remembered, twirling her wand in her hand. However, the background of the painting was different. The area beyond the rock was hidden by a thick wall. He was absorbing these details, when suddenly Ursula stood up and started pacing the length of the wall.

Harry just knew he could climb inside the portrait. He was thinking he would smash his head on the painting but nothing like that happened, he got through and appeared beside the wall. He looked at Ursula but she didn't take any notice of him and kept on pacing like a tigress on the prowl.

Harry could hear voices from the other side of the wall, which was strange because the wall seemed real thick. He started probing the walls, so that he could get a peek at whoever was speaking. He was prodding everywhere when he felt a small rock give way, and he was blasted with images that he was not at all prepared for-

It was Voldemort, pacing a poorly lit room. There was a hooded Death Eater kneeling on the floor, writhing in pain.

"Master... master, I couldn't... th- they stopped me before I got it."



"Why are you even alive, Avery? I send my best men and what do I get in return? Some sorry little tale about being overtaken by some enthusiastic rookies! You should be ashamed of yourselves! At least others dueled with them!"

"But—but, master! They were all killed... I was the only one who—"

"*CRUCIO!*" Avery started screaming his head off.

"You should have DIED, Avery, before coming here *EMPTY-HANDED!*"

The scene changed and everything went in a swirl of red and green smoke. The room was gone, and now he was seeing a young Tom Riddle of about twelve years, sitting on a bench in a park, reading a very ancient-looking thick book. That's why he wasn't aware of some boys not unlike Dudley's gang coming to ruin his tranquility.

"Ooooooh, little ickly Tommy is reading a book?" said the biggest boy, smirking at Tom.

Tom was looking afraid and it looked like he was sizing them up and deciding what approach would be the best to get away from them.

"Are you missing your daddy? Or just entertaining yourself with your freaky ideas-reading some fantasy, Riddykins? Let me see that."

The boys started coming closer when Tom yelled, "NO!"

"What did you say?" the big boy drawled.

"I'm warning you, Buxly, don't make me do this," Tom said, taking out his wand with shaky hands.

"Oh I'm sooooo scared, Tommy, look! My knees are buckling with fright... Ha ha! Are you gonna poke me in the eye, Tom, with this little stick of yours?" Other boys started tittering and snorting at Tom.

"Stupe-" Tom was half way through his spell when the closest boy snatched his wand away and shoved him to the ground. The boy

named Buxly stamped on the wand and broke it into two. There was a loud shriek of, "NOOOOOOOOO!"

The whole scene changed again in red and green smoke, shaped like a giant snake. The snake lunged at Harry from the gap in the wall and he scrambled back to get away from the smoky snake. His scar came alive and exploded painfully. The smoky snake was swirling around him, tightening its circle and bearing down on Harry, opening its grotesque, smoky-fanged mouth, ready to strike...

"HARRY, HARRY!"

Someone was calling his name. *Was it Ursula?*

"Harry, what's the matter, mate? C'mon, Harry!"

The blinding pain in his forehead was starting to recede and his vision was clearing. Ron was bending over him, while Harry himself was lying on the floor of his dorm room, clutching his scar. He must have slid from his bed during that... *It was a dream!*

"Did you have another vision or something - didn't you practice Occlumency today?" Ron asked. Dean, Seamus and Neville were all awake and standing beside Ron, looking worried.

"Should I call Professor McGonagall?" asked Neville timidly.

"No, no, I'm alright. It was just a dream...nothing to worry about." This solved the matter for the others, but Ron was still looking worried.

"It's okay, Ron, it was just a dream," Harry said simply.

-x.X.x-

## - CHAPTER 6 - Tarziah Vidal -

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Next morning he woke up early because he wasn't able to sleep well after that dream. He kept on shifting in his bed for a comfortable position, but to no avail. He got up at five o'clock and started to get ready for the first day of the term. He was rummaging for his favorite quill when his fingers made contact with something smooth and cold. It was a shard of the mirror that Sirius has given him. He took out all the shards and repaired it with *Reparo*, and whispered two words to it: "Sirius Black."

Harry looked at the mirror fixedly, hoping for any trace or sign of something other than his own reflection, but nobody appeared, and in frustration he shoved the mirror into one of the drawers in his desk. He took out Sirius's diary and placed it with the mirror. He'd work it out somehow-he knew he could do it.

He went about his unpacking, going through his gifts and finding places for them on his table. He put the Foe Glass on his desk (foggy shapes were roving in and out of focus), and placed the mirror given to him by Lupin with the diary.

He sat on the windowsill near his four-poster bed and started thinking about his dream of last night. He couldn't understand why he was having them in the first place. As usual, he had occluded his mind before sleeping. So how could he end up dreaming about Voldemort's childhood when he wasn't even born in that time? The memory saved in Tom Riddle's diary was his sixteen-year-old self; so how could Harry see a twelve-year-old Tom Riddle? And who were the people who defeated Avery? Was it the Order of the Phoenix? *Must be*, because some Death Eaters died... *that sure was good!* And what was that smoky-

His chain of thoughts was broken by Ron talking in his sleep. Harry caught snatches like, "Dunno how I'll do this," and, "How can I..."

Abandoning his attempts of clear thought, Harry headed for the owlery to check on Hedwig, as it was too early for breakfast. Almost the whole castle was asleep, including the portraits whose occupants were snoozing peacefully with low harrumphing sounds. He

encountered Filch on the way who eyed him suspiciously with Mrs. Norris in tow, who in turn stared at him with her lamp-like eyes.

"What are you up to now, Potter? Trying to set off dungbombs? On your first day back!" Filch barked at him, seeming outraged, but Harry was saved from answering by, Peeves the Poltergeist, who came flying in, riding a school broom and spraying mud from its rear end all over the corridor.

"Potty and the Old Hag - oh how enthralling! Wheeeeeeeee!" Peeves zoomed past them.

"I'll get you for this one, Peeves!" Filch snarled with his fists raised.

This was very convenient for Harry, as he slinked past Filch to the owlery unnoticed. He went straight for Hedwig's resting place without noticing his surroundings. He stroked her feathers and gave her some owl treats. She hooted happily, giving him her full attention.

Harry heard a shuffling sound from behind him and about-turned with the agility of a leopard, his wand out, expecting Malfoy. But found a very disheveled and puffy-eyed Colin, with his right leg stuck in an overturned basket. He must have been trying to get past him silently but didn't succeed.

"Hullo, Harry," he said in a hoarse voice.

"Oh, hi, Colin!" Harry was too surprised to say anything else.

With a pause he started again collecting his thoughts. "How are you? I'm so sorry... about your brother... if it helps; I know how it feels to lose someone close," said Harry, in an awkward manner, while Colin only nodded.

"Uhhh...So er... when did you arrive?" asked Harry.

"Last night, by Knight Bus."

"Oh, ok... er... Why don't you come with me to the Great hall, Colin? It's almost time for breakfast." Harry tried to sound cheerful.

"Okay," Colin replied, shrugging.

-X-

"Where have you been?" Ron yelled, not unlike Mrs. Weasley, but changed his expression immediately, seeing Colin in tow. Other students also saw him for the first time and lined beside him to offer their condolences.

Harry was finishing his toast when Professor McGonagall came and handed them their schedules. Hermione, who was talking to Colin, came to abrupt attention and started reading the time table aloud for changing the current topic of sudden-deaths at the Gryffindor table.

"Today we have double Transfiguration and double Potions."

"Yuck," said Ron, followed by an audible groan from the sixth year students.

"And History and then in my case, Arithmancy."

"Yuppers!" Ron whooped sarcastically, while Hermione gave him a stern glare which shut him up.

"And I have my first Occlumency lesson," said Harry.

"Good for you! No History to bore over and you'll learn Occlumency," said Ron resentfully. "Why didn't I fail?" he asked to nobody in particular.

Hermione rolled her eyes and as if remembering something, she asked Harry, "Aren't you going to tell us what you dreamt last night?"

Ron forgot about his whining and like Ginny became very alert to their conversation. Harry had to give in and told them his dream/vision. And before Hermione started lecturing, he informed her that he had indeed practiced Occlumency, to which she was not at all convinced

"Then you just haven't perfected it, that's all. I guess, Dumbledore will make it easier for you," she finished satisfactorily.

"But there is no news about any deaths in the Daily Prophet today," Ron provided skeptically.

"Maybe they haven't found the dead bodies yet?" said Harry in a hopeful voice.

"But that snake! Maybe it was not a vision, Harry, maybe it's an indication or a sign? We can find that out from the Oracle," Ginny provided.

Ron gave her an appalled look and informed her that, "Such things do not exist. Don't believe what that old bat teaches you. She has never been right. Look at Harry! She has predicted his death for four years. Does he look dead to you in any way?" he asked pointedly.

"N-no, no, but we haven't started Oracle in Divination yet! I just read it in a book, that's all," Ginny said defensively, looking at Harry, who had an odd expression on his face.

Sybill Trelawney, Harry's ex-Divination teacher, had actually been right twice already, but his friends didn't know about that and he wasn't sure that he was ready to tell them about the prophecy just yet.

"Now where have you transported to again? C'mon we're getting late for the class," said Ron nudging him and they hurried towards their Transfiguration class, while Ginny made for her Charms class.

-x-

Harry, Ron and Hermione were just settling down, when Professor McGonagall entered the class. As they were having their class with Hufflepuff, there were no exchanges of glares and smirks.

Professor McGonagall started her class by Congratulating everybody present because they all had passed their O.W.Ls with 'O' or 'E' and especially mentioning Neville's efforts because he also scraped an 'E' which made him blush the color of Ron's hair. She also advised them to start studying hard from the beginning, because, "N.E.W.Ts are no O.W.Ls".

"But, Professor, we have two years for that," said Hannah Abbott worriedly.

"Miss Abbott, you will be entering practical life after N.E.W.Ts. If you aren't prepared for your chosen career, what will you do then? Prepare pumpkin juice?" she bristled.

She informed them that they would be doing some advanced spells this term and that this class would bear some future Animagi. For their first lesson they were suppose to turn inanimate objects into different animals. They started with invertebrates and would approach the vertebrates after mastering the former.

They were given saucers and small cutlery items to transfigure them into tube worms or snails. They were taught a very complicated series of wand movement which included three swishes and four pointings.

Hermione was the first one in the class to change her tea-cup into a snail, for which she earned five points for Gryffindor. Ron's saucer crawled above the desk with a snail shell protruding from one side, while Harry was able to change his spoon into a tubeworm after an hour's worth of pointing, swishing and jabbing.

They all got homework by the end of the class to practice the spell and to read the whole chapter about the Transfiguration of inanimate objects.

Their first Potions class was one of its kind. Harry coming face to face with Draco Malfoy never produced good results and the same happened when they faced each other in the corridor outside the Potions classroom. As usual he was accompanied with his two cronies - Crabbe and Goyle, with Pansy Parkinson in tow.

"Potty, Weasel and Mudblood - the long lasting amity! You people make me sick," said Draco scornfully.

In an instant, two wands came out. "Watch your mouth, Malfoy," Ron said threateningly.

"Ooooooh little Weasel is going hot all over," said Draco, mimicking him smugly, while his smirk sidled back in place.

"Shut it, Malfoy!" said Harry angrily, daring him to say just another word. Neville, Dean and Seamus also took out their wands and pointed it towards the Malfoy clan.

"You are a Prefect too, Malfoy. You should not smear your reputation and lose the chances for Headboyship. I can assure you that your Daddy wouldn't be too pleased," Hermione taunted, much to Malfoy's chagrin.

However, they had to clear off the corridor, as ordered by the Head Girl, who was none other than Katie Bell. They filed inside the dungeon playing *who-will-glare-the-other-down-with-their-eyes*.

The class started with the dungeon door banging open and a very angry Snape sweeping in, with his usual air of arrogance. His face was set in a permanent sneer and his hair looked greasier than ever.

"This year's O.W.L results are too disgusting to even discuss. Some of you might be thinking in their little overactive minds that you have somehow managed to enter the N.E.W.T Potions class and you'll also somehow *manage* to get through!" he said looking menacingly at Harry.

"But you would be sadly MISTAKEN!"

Snape irately threw something in the cauldron beside him which hissed and frothed angrily, issuing red smoky bubbles.

"As I have already informed you time and time again, potion making is one of the most intricate sciences ever developed, there's no silly wand waving and swishing," he hissed and almost seemed to swell in anger.

"So, prepare for two years of serious concoction work on some very advanced potions, and this year I will not tolerate any naivety and ignorance! And it will start with deducting twenty points from Gryffindor, for being a lot of thick heads."



As usual, Gryffindors lost a total of thirty points in their first Potions' class, coming out with furious faces, with Ron shouting in Harry and Hermione's ears, "What did he mean by a bunch of thick heads? Is he blind or something? The biggest baboons are in *his own House!*"

-X-

After lunch, Ron and Hermione headed for History and Arithmancy respectively, while Harry went towards Dumbledore's office. Approaching the stone gargoyle, he remembered that he didn't know the current password but was saved the 'cockroach cluster guessing game' by none other than Dumbledore himself. He came ambling out of nowhere and took him inside his office. The occupants of the portraits were not feigning sleep, and after seeing Harry, they all became extra attentive.

"Hullo, Fawkes," Harry greeted, while Dumbledore's pet phoenix made a small twittering sound.

Harry could see that some furniture of the office was relocated, leaving a wide space enough for two wizards to duel.

"Harry, let's start," said Dumbledore, signaling him to take his spot at the opposite end of the room.

"Clear your mind from all worries." And Harry did so.

"*Legilimens!*" Dumbledore shouted.

Harry was facing Bellatrix Lestrange ... "*Crucio!*"

He dropped down to the floor feeling thousand needles piercing his body, but a small voice inside his head told him that this was just a memory he had to hide. With that thought still rounding his mind, he was transported to the dark place in his dreams. The red and green smoky snake was bearing down on him.

His scar exploded painfully.

"Are you alright, Harry?" asked Dumbledore looking down at him worriedly.

Harry found himself lying flat on his back on the office floor and all the portraits muttering between themselves

"Yeah, I'm fine," he said, hoisting himself up from the ground.

"Was that a dream of yours?" Dumbledore asked curiously.

"Yes it was," answered Harry and explained in detail the whole dream.

Dumbledore listened attentively and made him repeat the whole thing again and stopped him at the mention of the wall through which he saw everything.

"Well, this could be a plus..." Dumbledore muttered.

"Professor?"

As if he didn't hear Harry, he continued, "Harry, you need to practice this more. Imagine you have a Pensieve and before sleeping you transfer all your thoughts to that nonphysical Pensieve. Now try that in your mind, and empty it of everything."

After a long pause, during which Harry closed his eyes and started concentrating on emptying his mind of thoughts, Dumbledore shouted, "*Legilimens!*"

This time there was no vision and Dumbledore wasn't able to penetrate his mind for about five minutes.

"Very good, Harry!" Dumbledore exclaimed.

After one and a half hour's practice, Harry was able to make his mind impenetrable for more than ten minutes.

"You are getting closer, Harry, so keep practicing. You'll soon master it and then we'll make way for the Legilimency classes," said Dumbledore, sounding pleased.

-x-

Their first Defense Against the Dark Arts class was scheduled on Wednesday. As eagerly they had waited for it, as silently they filed

down their desk. It was very obedient of them to do that when Professor Vidal wasn't even present in the classroom.

After few minutes, Professor Vidal entered the class room with a rush of wind, apologizing for his delay.

"There was some official business to take care of... Anyhow, let's start with my introduction. As you all know, my name is Tarziah Vidal and I'm here to teach you the convoluted and sometimes misconstrued Defense Against the Dark Arts." He surveyed the whole with his glinting eyes.

Harry noticed that Vidal had a certain accent but he was not language expert enough to distinguish what dialect. With the exception of a slight emphasis on Z's, his English was quite lucid.

"I have been informed of the fates of the previous professors of this subject and I was really quite taken aback after hearing the increasingly alarming tales. Dumbledore even offered me to reject this proposition, but I was too besieged to refuse and I don't regret my decision. As you all know, Hogwarts has its own reputation of being the best, and what more a wizard could want than getting an opportunity to teach here?"

After a slight pause he continued, "Well, I'm actually from Romania."

Ron smacked his head with his hand. Hermione and Harry gave him a look but couldn't ask him what the matter was.

"I am an Auror by profession and was working with the Ministry of Romania. But when this job was offered to me, I took on the opportunity. You always want to be in the thick of things when you are an Auror." He gave a big mischievous smile to the class.

"I have also been informed that this particular class has more experience in Defense than all the seventh years put together," he said, his gaze lingering on Harry, Ron and Hermione.

"Your O.W.Ls results are extraordinary too-almost ninety percent of your class passed with an O... which made me more confident, as it always feels good to teach a class that is serious about their studies."

With a last playful smile which kept on trespassing his face now and then, he started calling out their names. No 'famous Harry Potter' or gaping came from Vidal. He didn't even look up when he called Harry's name, which was more than okay for Harry.

"Well, class, let's start from something interesting and useful. With the prevailing war situation, this spell can help you to disorient your opponent for five to ten minutes, during which your opponent will not be able to see anything as his vision will become foggy. If you master it well, you can make your opponent disoriented for half an hour."

He looked at them questioningly. "Does anybody know which spell I'm talking about?"

And to nobody's surprise Hermione's hand shot up in the air.

"Yes, Miss?"

"Hermione Granger, Professor. The Spell is called the '*Obscurus Spell*.'"

"Yes, correct! Five points for Gryffindor. Now let's learn the wand movement and the incantation." He demonstrated the wand movement with the incantation '*Obscurio*.'

The class was divided into pairs and after practicing the wand movement, the room was filled with shouts of 'Obscurio!'

Harry was paired off with Ron and Hermione with Neville. Harry was having fun with this spell and Ron didn't take much time to master it either. Whereas, Hermione was having trouble because Neville kept on saying '*Obscurao*' rather than 'Obscurio' which did not made her foggy, but shot hurricane-type wind at her which made her bushy hair stand on end.

Ron started laughing uncontrollably at the even bushier Hermione, causing Harry to sprout a bushy mustache due to his inattentiveness. Everyone burst into laughter seeing a bushy mustached Harry and a bushier Hermione. Professor Vidal cleared the matter up smilingly amusedly.

Their homework was to write an essay on 'the after effects of the Obscurus Spell.'

The moment they came out of the class Ron said incredulously, "Bloody Hell, I'm such a dunce!"

Hermione and Harry looked away, trying not to laugh.

"Vidal is Charlie's friend; that's why I was telling you guys the name rung a bell. Now I remember Charlie telling us about him, when he came back to the Burrow on his first vacation from Romania. I wasn't paying much attention, that's why I couldn't remember. They named him after some Muggle Cormick Hero, which I don't remember. He is a legend over there; you can consider him a younger version of Moody. He cleared off most of the Romanian Death Eaters after V-vo-You-Know-Who's fall."

"Oh say it already, Ron," Hermione said exasperatedly, which Ron completely ignored.

"So are you saying that Voldemort had foreign followers too?"

"Yes, Harry, if it wasn't for you, he would have achieved world domination by now," said Hermione, giving a shudder.

Harry was starting to like Vidal. His agility and mischievousness reminded him of the only person he didn't want to remember - Sirius. If Sirius hadn't have been framed for his parent's deaths, he would have lived a normal life and he might have been an Auror, just like Vidal was...

His melancholy sigh was interrupted by Hermione's jubilant voice. "Ron, do you mean the comic character named Tarzan? Was he named after him?"

Ron furrowed his brows in deep concentration, "Yeah, I think you are right. They called him just that - Tarzan Vidal."

-x.X.x-

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## - CHAPTER 7 - A New Minister-

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As time passed on, the school started getting back to normal. They were still wary of the unknown and unpredictable times, but with no new attacks from the Death Eaters, the students were calming down and getting used to the Hogwarts environment.

However, just when everyone was settling down, shocking news rocked the school again. Because of the attacks by the Death Eaters, the Wizengamot was demanding the resignation of the current Minister of Magic, Cornelius Fudge, and the appointment of a more responsible and fitting candidate for the job.

Harry was putting jam on his toast when the *Daily Prophet* carrying owl swooped down in front of him. Harry grasped the paper wildly which frightened the owl into nipping his fingers painfully.

"Owww - gerrof!"

Hermione paid the owl and they all started reading the headlines eagerly. Fudge's scornful picture was covering more than half of the front page.

-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-

The	Minister	Steps	Down
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-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-

***After much wild speculation by the Press and the wizarding community, Cornelius Oswald Fudge stepped down from his Ministership today.***

*After the atrocious and dreadful attacks by the Death Eaters on Platform Nine and Three Quarters, the Wizengamot and the wizarding population as a whole, has risen to the occasion and demanded the resignation of the Minister.*

*We have received inside information that the attack at Platform Nine and Three Quarters was not the only reason for this resignation and it is much more deep-rooted.*

*The Dark Lord has been at large since last year. At the finale of the Triwizard Tournament, when The-Boy-Who-Lived claimed that the Dark Lord had risen again, nobody believed him, even when he himself was the one who had vanquished the Dark Lord fourteen years ago.*

*Even with Dumbledore's constant insistence, nobody believed this horrendous truth because the Minister asserted that no such incident had occurred. Nonetheless, now we know from our sources that this truth was at last acknowledged by the Ministry with the appearance of Dark Lord himself at the Ministry's Head Office few months ago, which opened the wizarding world's eyes.*

*Confidential information has also been leaked that Dolores Jane Umbridge, the ex-Senior Undersecretary to the Minister, who was appointed as the High Inquisitor at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry last year, issued many illegal Educational Decrees during that appointment. She will be tried by the Wizarding Court on undisclosed charges, as soon as she is captured. Miss Umbridge has not been seen since she left Hogwarts premises at the end of the previous school year.*

*The new Minister of Magic will be appointed by the Wizengamot through the voting process. The first choice for the Minister was undoubtedly Dumbledore, but he has clearly refused this proposition. As he himself has stated, "I am more than happy with my current job."*

*The Wizengamot will announce the name of the new Minister tomorrow.*

*-x-X-x-*

*"Oh that twisted old gargoyle! At last, getting what she deserved!" Ron exclaimed happily and everybody murmured their approval.*

*"Hear, hear!" said Harry happily. "But where is she now? She couldn't have vanished into thin air?"*

*"That news makes me real worried," said Hermione with a frown.*

"Blimey, what if she's plotting revenge? She was ambitious and now because of our mate here,"-Ron said looking meaningfully towards Harry-"she has lost her job and toad-like demeanor," he paused for emphasis, "what if, she wants to swallow you like a fly, Harry?"

"Well, who knows? I can't live my life if I keep on thinking about how many people are plotting to kill me right now - because some of them just *are*," said Harry, ruffling his already untamed hair, looking distractedly at the Slytherin table.

"*Oh well*, but still-we've got Dumbledore!" Ginny said cheerfully, trying to change the subject.

"He would never leave Hogwarts. Ever," Hermione said matter-of-factly.

"That's a fact, but who's going to be the new Minister of Magic?" said Harry, pondering the answer himself.

"May be it's your dad?" said Hermione looking at Ron.

"Oh no! He's been appointed the Senior Undersecretary to the Minister already," said Ginny grinning.

"Wow! Great! But how come we didn't know about this before?" asked Harry, grinning broadly.

"Well, Dad wanted to keep it under wraps till the official announcement, because his appointment will be announced with the Minister of Magic," said Ron, flushing.

"Well, he deserved to be the Minister for sure! But no matter, the Undersecretary Job is the way towards it," said Hermione happily.

-x-

*Oh the perfect Harry Potter! I can see him now, with his ever loving, ever sacrificing, ever doting friends! The Hero! The Boy Who Lived! The Prince Charming! Who made so many girls' hearts a flutter! The one for whom people can't stop chanting.*



*Sometimes it makes me so queasy just to look at him. There was a time when I was too besieged by him, but now... I couldn't even... How much I despise him! He would never know... because he wouldn't have a chance to... ha... I will strike at the opportune time...*

The person sitting not so distant to Harry Potter smiled in triumph. It was a very eloquent smile but if someone looked closely, the smile was tinged with such malice and abhorrence that it completely altered that person's features.

*He is in for the time of his life this term! that person thought gleefully.*

-x-

Next day they all found out about their new Minister of Magic or rather, 'Mistress of Magic'. It was none other than Amelia Susan Bones, the former Head of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement. The Judge who was supposed to carry Harry's Hearing of Underage Sorcery last year, when he used a Patronus Charm to save his cousin Dudley from the Dementors in Wisteria Walk.

There was a lot of hue and cry over the appointment of a female Minister of Magic, mostly from the minority groups, who mostly consisted of the Pure-blood conservative wizarding families. After Voldemort's return, these people had become very covert because they neither wanted to attract attention nor speak aloud anything incriminating. These were the people who believed that only Pure-bloods should be considered wizards, not the Half-bloods or Muggle-borns.

But still, Amelia Bones became an instant success with the majority, because within a week of her appointment, she cleared up a lot of mess created by Fudge, including his incompetent staff and slack rules.

She became a celebrity overnight and Harry had no problem with that. The more he was away from the limelight the better. At least now *Daily Prophet* would have enough material without bothering with their usual Boy-Who-Lived cameo topics.

Harry was busy working on Sirius's diary along with his school work; working on different jumbles of words and browsing the Library for an effective *Cracking Charm* which could do the trick on secret diaries.

-X-

A cold wintry morning welcomed Harry as he awakened from a very disturbing dream. He had dreamt that he was falling in an abyss which was shaped like a snake's gaping mouth.

He was drowsy and because of the chilling weather, he wasn't much motivated in rising early. So he just rolled onto his side and wrapped the blanket tighter around him.

As it was a Sunday morning, he could very well have a lie in. He was somewhere in between wakefulness and dozing when Hermione came crashing through their dormitory door.

Dean, who was on the process of shoving off his blankets, wrapped the blankets tight around himself again because of the intrusion.

"Harry! Harry! Wake up!" Hermione came squealing towards his four poster bed.

"Keep your hair o-on! I'm awa-ake," said Harry, yawning.

Because of too much noise, other boys also peeked through their curtains; Neville almost went in shock and thumped to the floor because he lost his balance in between his long peek, and straightened instantly to save face. Whereas the other boys who were seeing the proceedings, started snickering, making Neville go red more than usual.

"Oh c'mon, get off the bed," said Hermione cart-wheeling on the balls of her feet.

Ron also woke up and hit his head on the base of Harry's four poster bed in shock, and then started fidgeting with his hair because it was standing on end. Harry couldn't help but laugh because, more than his hair, he was looking completely ridiculous in his ankle high Chudley Cannon's pyjamas.

"Stop it, Harry," Ron said flailing his arms towards Harry to smack him playfully.

"Oh, c'mon! Shake a leg, you two. MOVE!" Hermione ordered.

"What's the rush, Hermione? It's Sunday, for crying out loud," said Ron straightening his fringe.

"It's important, that's why! Harry, five minutes," she said by pointing towards her wrist-watch and went out of the room.

Harry and Ron freshened up and headed downstairs in the record time of six minutes.

"Cough up! What's so special?" asked Ron, sliding to his favorite arm chair.

"I think you should read this, Harry, it just came in the post," she said handing him a copy of *'Witch Weekly'*.

Amelia Bones was smiling at him from the cover.

"You wanted me to see this?" inquired Harry, raising an eyebrow.

"Not the Minister, look inside!" she said egging him on. He started leafing through the magazine with Ron craning his neck beside him.

He saw the caption in the content page: *"A Hero behind the Dark Mask: the truth about Sirius Black."*

### **O.o.O.o.O.o.O.o.O.o.O.o.O.o.O.o**

### **A Hero Behind the Dark Mask**

*There has been a lot of restructuring going on at the Ministry after the appointment of the new Minister of Magic. Many old files have been re-opened and one of them includes the official records about the alleged mass murderer and fugitive, Sirius Black, who till now was believed to be a Death Eater. He comes into a new light after his tragic death at the hands of Death Eater, Bellatrix Lestrange, who is an escaped criminal from Azkaban.*

*From the information released, we understand that Black was framed into life imprisonment at Azkaban because of his own friend, Peter Pettigrew, a Death Eater, who is not dead as previously believed, but is still among the living. Pettigrew is also responsible for several other deaths, including twelve Muggles, Ministry official Bertha Jorkins and Triwizard champion Cedric Diggory.*

*Sirius Black was completely innocent but nonetheless imprisoned without a trial for twelve long years and was hunted down like a criminal for more than two years.*

*With new found evidence, another striking feature has been revealed: Sirius Black was also the Godfather of Harry Potter, the Boy-Who-Lived. Black broke out of Azkaban with the purpose of bringing the truth to light, but couldn't live to see the same truth realized.*

*The Ministry has decided to honor Sirius Black's audacity and courageous efforts to unmask the real traitor behind these malicious murders.*

*In a private ceremony, Harry Potter will receive a Special Award: Order of Merlin, First Class on behalf of his Godfather from the Ministry.*

-x-X-x-

So, now the Ministry was apologetic and ready to hand him down Special Awards! *Where were they when Sirius was cooped up in hiding just because of their short sightedness?* Harry thought malevolently.

Ron and Hermione were looking at each other, waiting for a cue. Harry coiled the magazine's pages and stood up suddenly.

"I'm going to the Library," he almost barked.

"But- but-" Hermione stuttered and Ron managed a small confused, "Harry?"

Harry didn't even look back. He was on a mission because he had to solve the puzzle of Sirius's diary TODAY!

He spent the rest of the morning and afternoon leafing through old books, for finding some kind of clue, a hint, ANYTHING! He was becoming more desperate by the moment.

Ron and Hermione came to visit him at the Library to coax him out of there but he just shooed them away.

"I'll tell you what's going on when I solve this puzzle!" said Harry ruffling his hair irately.

"May be we can help?" said Hermione hopefully.

"No! Just leave me alone will you? I need to do this on my own!" said Harry dismissing them.

-X-

Harry was on his way to the dormitory laden with as many books he could carry. He was almost kicked out of the Library for having such a mess on his table (a mountain of books and papers scattered all over). Madam Pince kept huffing that she would have to spend more than half an hour to clear his mess up before closing.

Harry hadn't eaten anything the whole day and that's why his stomach was rumbling rhythmically, but the irony of the situation was that the dinner time was over too. He was thinking of nicking food, but was saved the trouble of raiding the kitchen by Hermione, Ron and Ginny, as they were waiting for him in the common room with dinner.

Hermione and Ron were completely engrossed in a conversation and Ginny was reading a book. That's why they didn't notice him as he entered through the portrait hole. Harry didn't know what were they talking about but it seemed something important.

When he ahemed for attention, Ron and Hermione broke apart like something had jolted them.

"You are back!" said Hermione happily.

"So, found anything in your crusade?" asked Ginny.

Harry didn't answer but started wolfing down everything in sight. They could clearly see that he was in no mood of telling them what he was up to.

"Professor McGonagall was looking for you, Harry. She told me to inform you that she'll be expecting you in her office tomorrow after class," said Ron timidly.

"All right," Harry said simply.

After eating he propped himself in a comfortable position on his favorite squashy chair and started leafing through the books again. He selected "*What to do - when there is no other way*" and got engrossed in it without even exchanging a look with his friends.

Hermione gave him a very stern look but didn't say anything. After a while of waiting around and seeing total non-communication from Harry, they all stood up for their nightcap.

When Harry didn't give any indication of movement, they all said, "Night," to Harry and went to their separate dormitories.

Harry waited for a while and then made his way to his room. Ron's snores told him that he was asleep. Even then, he rummaged through his trunk carefully and tip toed towards the stairs clutching his invisibility cloak, Sirius's diary and the Marauder's Map.

He draped the cloak around him and headed for the portrait. Fat Lady was already bleary with sleep; therefore she didn't notice that nobody went out of the common room after the portrait swung shut.

Harry checked the map for any intrusion in between. Filch and Mrs. Norris were patrolling the area near the Library and the trophy room respectively. Nobody else was in between his way.

After some flights of stairs and shortcuts, Harry faced Barnabas the Barmy being clubbed by a moth eaten Troll.

*I need a quiet place for solving a puzzle*, he kept on repeating this in his mind and pacing the length of the wall beside a man-sized vase.

A mahogany door appeared right beside him after his third pace. He opened it and looked inside.

It was a very comfortable looking room, not as big as he remembered when he used it for the DA meetings. On the left side the whole wall was covered with a built-in-cabinet containing books about solving different magical riddles and a lot of small boxes which Harry didn't touch, as he knew better.

On the right side there was a huge working table with supply of many quills, different colored ink, parchments etc. There was also a very inviting plush chaise lounge in the center of the room on which Harry propped himself placidly.

He took out the Marauder's Map for help as he thought there must be some hidden clue in the map. He had already thought up a way to work out the diary. He just needed to try it.

He unfolded the Marauder's Map and tapped his wand on it without saying the incantation, *"I solemnly swear I'm up to no good."* But nothing happened...

He tapped his wand again saying, "Padfoot, show yourself."

Still nothing...

"Padfoot, it's me, Harry! C'mon, reveal yourself to me!" he said with an urgent tone.

Harry forgot to take his next breath, because an invisible hand was writing something on the map.

*"Mr. Padfoot is bowled over by the courage of this sixteen year old, who-"* the flowing tilted writing paused for a moment, *"looks astonishingly like Mr. Prongs."*

Harry smacked his head, chastising himself for not trying this before. There was more writing to read:

*"Mr. Prongs is very angered that some good-for-nothing boy is taking on his appearance."*

Harry chuckled tensely, because at that time, his father James didn't know that someday he would rear a son almost like him.

*"Mr. Moony would like to add that the sodding git's nose is not clean."*

Harry involuntarily wiped his nose with his sleeve.

*"Mr. Wormtail would like to affix, 'ha ha ha'."*

*This is going nowhere*, Harry thought, amused. He tried again but this time he tapped the map and said, "Sirius, it's about your diary! Tell me how to work it out!"

*"Mr. Padfoot would like to add three words to Mr. Harry, 'hair brained git'."*

Harry thought that either this was too easy or a very stupid joke and waited for others to say something, but none of the other Marauders wrote anything back.

He thought about Sirius and how he would have chosen a password or incantation for his diary. The Sirius he knew was almost always serious except when he was with him, when his newly acquired cynical wit would get the better of him; however, the young Sirius was a firecracker as everything was a joke for him.

*Could this really be... could this be IT?* he thought.

He didn't waste another second and took out the diary and tapped his wand on it saying, "Hair brained git," thinking, *This is so stupid!*

However, the events that followed in a microsecond succession made him thump to the ground in surprise.

The room around him changed, it was as if a paintbrush had painted the walls of the Room of Requirement into something very familiar. Harry stood up to see, that he was somehow back at the Grimmauld Place and was standing in Sirius's room. Still, this change was more disconcerting because the whole scene around him was black and white. He checked his glasses and rubbed his eyes, finding that his vision was working absolutely fine except there was no color.



He was moving for the door of the room when his heart did a somersault and started beating in his head instead. Harry had just heard someone call his name, and that someone was none other than Sirius himself.

## - CHAPTER 8 - Padfoot Returned -

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Harry slowly and steadily turned around, daring his eyes not to see Sirius. *This can't be true... I'm going nuts... This must be some deception...* he kept on thinking.

Blood came rushing to his head, pounding its way through his ears. Goosebumps broke out on the back of his neck. At that moment, Harry could feel every particle of his body on alert in apprehension... This was no dream or deception because he remembered opening the diary...

Sirius was sitting on a rocking chair and Harry couldn't believe what he was seeing.

The floodgates of grief which were trickling into his soul, since the day Sirius went behind the veil, burst open with full force.

His vision became blurry and he blinked back the tears which were threatening to fall on his cheeks. He took a deep breath and closed his eyes to calm his nerves. He opened his eyes again.

In that moment:

*He felt like, more than a lifetime went by, since he saw Sirius last, falling to the ground behind that flickering veil...*

*He died and was reborn...*

*He was taken out from the ever consuming inferno of agony...*

*He was a free bird soaring through the air...*

*He was that particle which reached infinity...*

*He was the embodiment of misery before, but now someone had just set him free...*

*He was home at last...*

His godfather in flesh; breathing, alive, moving... he just wanted to hug him and didn't want to let go.

"Sirius?" said Harry in a very hoarse voice. His suppressed emotions were making his head pound and his throat ache.

Without saying anything Sirius stood up and came to hug Harry as if he just knew what must have brought Harry to him... at that moment... in that time.

The bear-hug continued for a long time. Harry let the floodgates open at last... He cried for his parents... he cried for his Godfather... he cried for the whole mean life, as it was-a memory flickered past his eyes of a great black shaggy dog rearing on its hind paws to give a pat on Harry's shoulder-it took a while for Harry to get his emotions in check.

After calming down a little, he seated himself on the sofa near Sirius's rocking chair while Sirius surveyed him closely.

"So... by what name you called me in front of strangers?" asked Sirius directly.

This was quite unexpected. Harry thought, *What's he playing at?* But still he answered, "Snuffles, of course! But why are you asking me this question?" he asked with an agitated voice.

"It *is* you!" Sirius exclaimed grasping his shoulders.

"I still don't understand-"

"Well, to make long stories short, this diary contains so much information that, if it went into wrong hands, it may ruin a lot of lives including yours. So, I took a leaf from Moody's book and thought to double-check... just in case," said Sirius, again surveying him up and down, but this time with concern.

"This does not look good! Did I die so early?" Sirius exclaimed very innocently, wiping his brow in frustration. He didn't know that the mention of his death made a dagger's cut, across Harry's heart.

Sirius read the distress filled expression in his eyes and changed stances instantly. "Well, for a start, let me tell you about this diary."

He gestured at something invisible and taking a deep breath, started reminiscently, "When I was still studying at Hogwarts, living a very fun and enjoyable life with my fellow Marauders that is, I thought that these moments will never come back again and I have to somehow capture them for my old age." He guffawed bitterly for his life.

"So I got this enchanted Diary from Florish and Blotts and enhanced its covert qualities by putting some nifty spells on it, some of which were my own invention and made its characteristics like a Pensieve. But there is a catch to it, I'm the only one who could use it to record memories, but anybody can see these memories, if they know the right incantation, which I thought up in my Hogwarts days."

"That figures," said Harry with a feeble smile.

"I brought it up to date when I came back to Grimmauld Place, because I knew then that maybe I'd never see my old flat ever again... I wanted to record my last memory at the house I loved, the house I occupied after moving out of James' house. I wanted to make it special for my future family," he paused for a moment for collecting his thoughts.

"But, it wasn't to be... Dumbledore wanted me to stay... but then you came here and I found my family as well as a part of my lost friend..."

Harry lowered his head to fight back the tears that were threatening to surface. He was not very astonished to find Sirius's eyes misty too.

"If I hadn't been sent to Azkaban, I would have straightened a lot of things for you... I wanted to make up for the things you've lost." His voice broke in emotion.

"But my fate was doomed..." He again paused for a while, musing over something and then continued with a very tired voice, "I have updated the events after I escaped the Dementors, because I didn't want you to find a very disheveled Sirius - telling his family that his best friend was just murdered... because the last time I wrote in it was

the night when Voldemort murdered your parents," he rushed through these words in one breath.

Harry was still so dazed by the whole proceedings that these words didn't bother him at all. He had suddenly found happiness by talking to Sirius again... Sirius, from the past, but still, he was his Godfather after all.

A thought fluttered across his mind "Can you come out of the diary, Sirius?"

Harry's expressions were guarded this time. He didn't want to look too happy because if Sirius wanted some memories to come out of the diary, Harry could give it to him and gladly. No matter even if his life depended on it.

Sirius let out a short bark of laughter and said, "No, Harry, I could never; this is just an enhanced memory of me. I never wanted to bug people like Voldemort did. This is no Riddle's diary, Harry." Sirius looked deep in Harry's eyes, like he understood what Harry was actually thinking.

"But I saw you, Sirius! On my sixteenth birthday and I knew it-it couldn't be you, because you went behind the veil..." Harry thought he must have said too much. But from the expression on Sirius's face it looked like he understood him completely.

"Well, maybe you hallucinated? And anyway, I don't want the sordid details of my death, Harry. Tell me in your own time. I don't want to make things difficult for you."

For changing the subject, he started a different tale. "You know this memory belongs to the time when you popped in the fireplace raging like a Banshee about your father, that he was a complete idiot and in that short time I couldn't make you understand, that he had a very kind heart and he never hurt anybody except the Slytherins. Yes, we loved mischief because we were the Marauders after all, and we did despise Snape, but there were good reasons!" He huffed up in anger at the mention of Snape's name. But his expressions changed again as he saw Harry's guarded expression.

"So, how is everything, Harry? To put it mildly," asked Sirius in a very concerned voice.

Now it was Harry's turn to be bitter.

"Well... Voldemort is at it again. Death Eaters have killed three students of Hogwarts and a witch at Platform Nine and Three Quarters. It was for the first time that Hogwarts Express was delayed. The war is coming nearer and I am having strange dreams night after night; in spite of the fact that I am practicing Occlumency everyday."

"Is Snape still teaching you?"

"No," Harry said with a sigh of relief. "Dumbledore is teaching me and he reckons that I should learn Legilimency too."

"He must have good reasons, he always has." There was a touch of bitterness in his voice.

"Do you know about the prophecy, Sirius?" Harry asked.

"Yes, Dumbledore told me, Remus and Arthur about it after the first meeting of the Order. I know you have hard times ahead of you but in my hearts of hearts I know you can pull it through. I myself never believed in prophesying, but half of the prophecy turned out to be true. So, I had to believe... Anyways, is your scar still hurting?" Sirius inquired, trying to get over the heavier things.

"Yes it is, when I'm having weird dreams." Harry told him about that strange dream in which he saw Voldemort's childhood.

"Maybe you are reading his mind or maybe his and your powers are swapping each other? But I am sure that Dumbledore will see through that." A curious smile spread across his face.

"So, when did you find my diary? Are you ready to tell me?" Sirius asked with as much caution as he could muster.

"You were killed"-Harry took a deep breath to calm his nerves-"in June. You came to save me from the clutches of Death Eaters because I was stupid enough to believe the visions passed on by

Voldemort that you were being tortured in the Department of Mysteries. In reality, he wanted the prophecy and tricked me to get it for him. I endangered my friend's and family's life and paid a very hefty price." Harry sighed and took off his glasses to pinch the bridge of his nose. He didn't want to tell him the details that it was his loathsome cousin Bellatrix who succeeded in finishing him off.

"So, Voldemort knows about the prophecy now?" Sirius shifted in his chair in agitation looking very discouraged.

"No, Neville smashed the prophecy for good and Voldemort failed to get it."

"That was good," Sirius said regaining his composure.

Harry looked reproachful and Sirius got to it again. "I know, Harry! Being dead is not all that great and I can understand how difficult it would have been for you. But you have to channel your anger now. It's not only you he's after anymore; it's the whole wizarding community and the world at large. Because Muggles don't even know that there is an evil and demented wizard with extraordinary powers in their midst," he rationalized.

"I have believed in one thing for my whole life, Harry, and it is that Goodness always wins. And I know that it will be this way, in the end," he said significantly.

"Well, it's getting late for your own good and the time spent here is equal to your actual time... And another thing, Harry; this diary only works when you are alone. So, you can't make your friends see the incidents which are recorded in the diary."

"What exactly is recorded in the diary, Sirius?" asked Harry.

"A lot of things, some incidents from my childhood, my Hogwarts days, duels and battles I had after entering practical life - in a nut shell, mostly all of my adventures. And I know that this will be very interesting for you, because in almost all of them your father was present... You only need to take out the date and tap that page saying the incantation and you'll be transported to that time.

"So, any more questions about the working of the diary?"

"No, nothing. But I can always talk to you, Sirius? Can't I?" asked Harry hopefully.

"I advise you not to, Harry. To dwell in the past is never a healthy hobby," Sirius said with a painful expression on his face.

"I don't want you to mourn me all the time, because then you'll become weak. You have to be strong and get over me as you've done so in case of your parents... I know it takes time, but still..." he continued, "It is very agonizing for me to set restrictions on you, but I have set a limit on this diary. You can only use it once a day and..." he paused to rake his brains, like he was trying to find some sweet combinations of words to break something awful to him.

"You are seeing me here for the last time, Harry," Sirius blurted out in one breath.

"WHAT!" Harry shouted in protest but Sirius held up his hand in front of him.

"It was difficult for me too... but I knew it that if this memory persisted, you will visit it day after day and you could never accept my death. And it is true, you have to accept it that I am indeed dead and can't come back."

"This is CRUEL and INHUMAN, Sirius. How could you? Bringing me happiness one second and giving me tons of misery the other! What was the purpose of this diary then? Tell me, Sirius!" Harry bellowed in frustration. It was like he was losing Sirius all over again.

"Please, Harry, try to understand..." Sirius tried to grab his shoulder but Harry beat him to it, and started pacing the room.

"I know you too well, Harry... Please forgive me but I can't go back and undo anything," said Sirius in an emotional voice.

Harry didn't say anything but a lava was erupting inside him, seeping through his body, making him tremble with rage.



"Please, Harry, try to understand! I don't have much time to explain."  
Sirius followed him and grabbed him to stop his pacing.

"I never had the courage to say the things I am going to tell you now, because I know that there will be no next time." Harry was staring at Sirius's shoes but still was listening to him intently.

"From the day I saw you, you always reminded me of James and to tell you the truth, he was my best friend, my brother and my family. When he died, a part of me died with him and the only thing saving me from losing my sanity at Azkaban was vengeance and a feeble wish to see my godson. I always wanted a son who would follow the footsteps of Marauders and I found my future son in you. You are my family and you will always be... I know that when I died I would have been happy because I would be meeting my brother, my partner in crime. Never mourn me, Harry; there is a reason for everything... I know fate can be cruel but accept the ups and downs of life even though it's not always what you want it to be."

Sirius hugged Harry tight, while Harry breathed over the tears which were crowding his throat.

Sirius's room was dissolving but Harry held unto him.

"Be well, Harry, and take care of yourself," Sirius's fading voice was echoing from somewhere.

"Sirius, NOOOO!"

Sirius was gone with the whirling smoke as the Room of Requirement came blazing back in its full color.

Harry lowered his gaze and looked at the palm of his hands and fell down on his knees clenching his fists. He broke down for the last time, calling out his godfather's name.

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Harry staggered into the common room, all red and puffy eyed, the next morning, because he had spent the night in the Room of

Requirement. Ron, who had been waiting for him in the common room, yelped in horror because he thought him to be a zombie.

His meeting with Professor McGonagall was cancelled because of his illness. He suffered from high fever, flu and occasional visits of Migraine for three consecutive days and was put in Madam Pomfrey's care, who kept clucking like a mother hen over his condition.

Dumbledore paid him a visit with Professor McGonagall in tow, but Harry pretended to be asleep.

"Was it wise, Albus? Giving him the diary and reliving Sirius's death?" Professor McGonagall said with a shaky voice. "He looks so frail. It seems as if all the happiness has been sucked out of him."

"Fate can be very cruel sometimes, Minerva, still, if I know correctly... Harry will come through." With these words he stroked Harry's hair affectionately and went out of the hospital wing. Harry slept that day with Dumbledore's voice ringing in his ears ...*will come through...*

Ron, Hermione and Ginny came to visit him regularly and one day, the whole Gryffindor house including the very timid looking first-years, came to see Harry much to the dismay of Madam Pomfrey whose eyes bulged the size of dinner plates, seeing so many students at once and barked her head off till all of them cleared out of the wing.

He received so many 'Get well' cards that a separate table was placed beside his bed just for accommodating them. In reading them out to Harry, Ginny found a very bizarre card in their midst, which enclosed a single message, written with red ink, in a very unsteady handwriting:

'Harry Potter... You are M iNE...'

Ginny thought the better of it, and pocketed it for later. *Harry has so many problems already; this will have to wait for some other time*, she thought.

Mrs. Weasley sent Harry a very long letter instructing him to do a whole two pages worth of '*to-do and not-to-do*' things, like:

- *Don't go out, you'll get other student's germs.*
- *Wash your hands before eating.*
- *Always wear your socks.*
- *Don't scratch your eyes, you may get conjunctivitis.*
- *Don't go to the bathroom without your jumper and muffler on.*
- *Take bath in the hot tub.*
- *Don't notice the flirtations of the Mermaid Portrait.*
- *Take the medication on time!*

The list went on and on...

Ron mimicked his mother's voice and said, "If you want anything, ask Ron to get it for you. Yes, Harry! I am your servant, at your command. Please tell me, master! What do you want?" Ron playfully bowed very low beside Harry's bed grasping his hand pleadingly, which conjured Harry's first smile in three days, and for his friends this was just *grand*.

Lupin paid a visit to check on him along with a very worried looking Hagrid, whose entrance dwarfed everything in sight.

"Yeh are alrigh' aren' yeh? I was summat' worried."

Harry was kept on a healthy diet of chocolates, fruits and white meat. He felt almost bloated sometimes but Madam Pomfrey would turn a deaf ear to his pleas. So, when he was discharged finally, he was feeling healthier than an over-stuffed bullfrog.

Harry at last told Ron, Hermione and Ginny about Sirius's diary during one of their chit-chats, and the reason why he showed up so late that Monday.

Their reactions were just as he had predicted.

Hermione's eyes watered and she gave a small squeak. Ginny looked pained and started rocking in her chair worriedly. Ron looked

flabbergasted and said, "He came out of the diary? ... Merlin's Beard!"

-x.X.x-

## CHAPTER 9 - A Giant Mistake -

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After another day's recovery, Harry went back to his usual time-table at Hogwarts. He lived another day to attend another lesson of Potions-his most hated subject and Professor at Hogwarts.

He was doodling in his parchment, when he was brought back to the real world by Snape's menacing voice. To Harry's disappointment, the Potions class was still going on.

"So, our celebrity is back!" Snape announced scathingly, while all the Slytherins smirked at him. One pointy-nosed face was particularly visible.

"Unfortunately, Potter, your over-inflated ego cannot prevent you from getting sick." Snape smiled wickedly, showing his yellowed teeth. "But potion-making can prevent it, Potter. That is, if you pay *attention*!" The last words were hissed at him.

The ingredients for their new potion appeared on the black board. The potion was called the '*Meroceli Potion*' and it could be used for curing many types of illness, except only when used in the appropriate quantity. An over-dosage could result in death. They were instructed to use dragon-hide gloves, because some of the ingredients used were hazardous.

Harry was peeling the Orpano roots vigorously when one of its skins landed straight *-smack-* on Snape's right eye because he was surveying Harry too closely. He let out an involuntary yowl, spun on his heels and hastily made for his office. Ron slapped Harry's shoulder with an expression of bliss. "Bull's-eye!"

Neville sniggered with pleasure and informed them the reason behind Snape's hasty departure. "The Orpano root's skin is very toxic in nature and they cause painful swelling. Snape ran to his office to take cover," he finished looking at them significantly.

Everybody knew that Neville excelled in Herbology and he was proved right, because Snape didn't materialize for another half hour, to which Harry muttered, "Good riddance!"

He was also able to concoct a perfect Meroceli Potion in Snape's absence. When Snape came back with only a trace of a redeye, he was not very pleased to see Harry's potion work.

"Ten points from Gryffindor for not peeling the Orpano roots properly." He docked points from Gryffindor with his usual air of arrogance.

Harry wanted to point out that if his peeling had been wrong, the potion wouldn't have been frothing blue bubbles as it was suppose to, but he knew better than to argue, so he shut his mouth. The reason wasn't Snape only; Draco was doing swooning motions behind Snape's back, making muffled choking sounds and pretending to be sick.

-x-

September was drawing to a close and chilly winds were making all of the students' hairdos electrified.

Harry was hunched down beneath a beech tree beside the lake, reading a book, hidden from view. He was snatching dead twigs from the ground absentmindedly.

Yesterday, Harry and Katie's Captaincy was formally announced by Professor McGonagall along with the schedule of Quidditch tryouts. He also received letters from Oliver Wood and Angelina Johnson congratulating him and giving him some extra captaincy advice. Even sharing the position with Katie, he wasn't fully prepared for coaching his team to victory-that's why he was going through *Quidditch through the Ages* and *Quidditch Maneuver Book* again and again.

He was reading the book given to him by Ginny on Quidditch maneuvers but his thoughts kept on drifting towards every other thing. Like, he hadn't used the diary for more than two weeks... there was so much homework to do... he had to-

He heard a rustle of leaves and to his astonishment found Cho materializing beside him.

"Hello, Harry," she said nervously.

"Er... Hi," said Harry, bewildered.

*What was she doing here all alone?*

"I just came by to see... umm... how you were doing... I heard that you were sick," she said looking more nervous than ever. She was not even looking straight at him but was stealing glances through her lowered eyelashes.

Harry was quite taken aback. "Well... I'm fine. It was only flu, nothing serious."

"And- and congratulations for making the Captaincy of the Gryffindor team. You must be really looking forward to it after last year's ban."

"Katie is Co-Captaining with me, so I'm not *the* Captain."

Harry was getting suspicious by the second, he was thinking of continuing to something like, "Why do you care?" when he was again interrupted by her.

"I just came to say that I'm really sorry about last year... umm... the way Marietta behaved with you, it was very wrong of her..." She was wringing her hands nervously and was rubbing her thumb on the sides of her index finger.

"Well, we can't do anything about that CAN WE? The damage is already done! Time can't be turned back now! CAN IT?" He almost snarled at her in anger.

Cho was looking on the verge of tears. She said in a shaky voice, "If it counts, I'm really sorry for what she did, Harry..."

He again became wrong-footed. *What it is with girls!* he thought exasperatedly.

He closed his eyes and took a deep calming breath and opened his eyes to tell her off when he noticed that Cho was looking somewhat different today. She had her hair down and she was standing in such an angle that the setting sun's last golden rays were reflecting on her

shiny black hair, which made her hair look a light shade of auburn rather than black. She was looking so breathtaking-

"Harry?" echoed a familiar voice.

*Who was it?* he thought.

He suddenly became aware of his surroundings and said, "Cho?" in bewilderment. She was smiling at him but looked a little drawn.

"Well, see you, Harry," she said and sashayed across the garden towards Hogwarts grounds.

Ginny was coming towards him with Ron in tow, looking quite angry and confused at the same time.

"What was *she* doing with you?" Ron asked in a loud voice, which was louder than he had actually intended.

Ginny was asking the same question but in a silent manner, with her piercing dark brown eyes, cutting through everything-the air, the unseen particles, his glazed expression, his demeanor-sending electrifying bolts at Harry, literally.

He suddenly didn't have words to explain the situation and his behavior. So, he started stuttering instead, making the matter even worse. "Well... er... she came to say sorry for Marietta-"

"Why can't Marietta do it herself?" Ginny asked pointedly.

"Well... I dunno," said Harry without looking at Ginny, while Ron came to his rescue.

"We were sick with worry, mate! We thought you were ambushed or something. Hermione is looking for you indoors right now."

"Why would I be ambushed in broad daylight?" Harry asked incredulously.

"Well, it's looking like there are many people here who don't want you prancing about Hogwarts, Harry," Ron said rolling his eyes.



"Remember Malfoy's threat at Diagon Alley? And also for refreshing your mind, have a looksie here!" Ron shoved the card which was written in blood into Harry's hand.

Ginny had told Ron and Hermione about it, when Harry went missing for more than two hours.

"I can't recognize the hand writing," said Harry sheepishly.

"It is written in a manner that is not *supposed* to be recognized," Ginny said icily.

"Well, what can I say? Should I hang around with a shout-out saying, 'Come here, Gentleman or Lady, and stand in line beside Draco and Voldemort for killing Harry Potter, because you are not the only one?'" Harry said sarcastically making a face, and continued on, "I dunno what was she doing here or her purpose. I told you all that I am over her, but if she's having second thoughts, I can't do anything about *that*, can I?" This shut Ron's gaping mouth and Ginny's posture to relax, as she was standing stiff as a board before.

When they were making their way to the common room, Ron did a double take, like he remembered something and said to Harry, "The reason we were looking for you, mate." Ron continued avoiding eye-contact, "Professor McGonagall had asked me tell you that Amelia Bones will be visiting Hogwarts in October, and she'll also be presenting you the Order of Merlin," he finished, trying to read Harry's expression.

Harry became sour again.

*The Ministry... BLAH! Now that Sirius is dead, the whole world is acknowledging him. Good thing that Quidditch season is starting or I would have had to hex everyone in sight to kill time,* Harry thought irately.

So, were things getting back to normal- *Yes! They certainly ruddy were!*

-X-

Harry was looking over towards Ginny, because after yesterday's events she was quite miffed and wasn't even acknowledging his presence, and he wasn't feeling very jovial either because of these new developments.

Sometimes, he just couldn't make up his mind about what to do about his budding feelings for Ginny which never took a proper form or even about the last remaining flare of his feelings for Cho.

For the hundredth time, he thought about what was so special about yesterday's visit. He pondered on about his dumbness that why he acted like a complete moron in front of Cho and why after announcing indirectly that she was going out with Michael Corner at the end of the last term, she was again interested in him? When he didn't feel anything for her, at least to his better knowledge-

His attention was diverted towards Hermione who had just toppled her goblet of pumpkin juice.

"What's the matter, Hermione?" he asked in a concerned voice.

"There has been a breaking and entering at the Department of Mysteries. Whoever it was, has been able to get his or her hands on something really important!" she finished in alarm, folding the *Daily Prophet* into half to read the short column buried in the forth page.

"What was stolen?" asked Ginny with rapt attention.

"That's the main problem! They haven't mentioned what was stolen but from reading the article, it looks something very significant. I think it's some kind of a document or-"

"Could be a secret weapon?" interjected Harry, as he remembered the prophecy.

"I remember what whacko things are there," said Ron, giving a shudder.

Harry remembered the brains too, which had left the now fading welts on Ron's arms. He also remembered the locked door, in which

according to Dumbledore, his powers lay. However, he still couldn't understand what they actually were.

"I'm having a very bad feeling about this; my scar doesn't hurt so much these days, but whenever it does-" Harry changed stances instantly by looking at the worried glances he received, which were uplifting in a way, because Ginny was looking concerned too.

"Don't worry, it's not often, but I get this feeling... I can't make you all understand... I have a feeling that Voldemort is planning something really dreadful," he finished uncertainly.

There was an involuntary group shudder and students who were sitting near them, busy in their own talks suddenly became aware of their abrupt silence. A first year boy was staring at him with big saucer shaped eyes. Harry grimaced at the expression and the boy almost stumbled over in his own seat.

"We are getting late for Hagrid's class," Neville's voice registered.

"Oh yeah!" They all scrambled for the Entrance Hall with Harry saying, "Bye, Ginny," and receiving a curt, "Bye," in return.

The Slytherins hadn't arrived for the class; so, they went towards Hagrid for a little chitchat. Hermione at once started questioning him about the thing which was stolen from the Ministry.

"Erm... dunno what yer talkin' abou'," he said lamely.

"Oh c'mon, Hagrid, we know you are better than that; member of the Order and all that!" said Harry, winking at him.

"Yeh kids don' know what yer meddlin' in... 'ts better yeh don' know," he finished in a business-like manner, which was very unlike Hagrid.

They exchanged glances for further persuasion but seeing the Slytherins arrive, they abandoned it for the time being, as talking in front of them about something covert would be incredibly stupid.

As usual, Malfoy came sandwiched between the two official trolls, Crabbe and Goyle, who sported their usual glazed expressions. A

slight difference was that Pansy was dangling from one crook of Malfoy's arm.

Draco's eyes gleamed mischievously and Harry also gave him a killer smile saying, *let's get it ON!*

Angry sparks shot between them and the audience almost waited eagerly for some action; the growing tension became so palpable that they just stared at the two factions alternately-but they were disappointed to hear Hagrid's attention-seeking grunt. He was beaming at the class with a very playful smile on his face.

"This lesson's goin' ter be *great!*"

'Great' was spoken with much emphasis and it looked like everyone's breath was caught in their throats. They all knew what meant by Hagrid's 'great.'

They hadn't forgotten their first class of Care of Magical Creatures this term. They had been introduced to the Crups. It mostly resembled a Jack Russel terrier but with closer inspection, the forked tail told all. As it was a wizard-created dog, it was loyal to the magical kind while barking-mad at Muggles. However, that didn't mean that if it was poked repeatedly, it was going to lick your hands, no Sir! And that's just what happened with Malfoy, with utter delight to some Gryffindors.

Slytherins just fell in love with the creature and Draco just so wanted a Crup as his pet, but screamed like a girl when the Crup swiped its tail, for his face pell-mell. All in all, the lesson was quite terrifying because most of them were quite afraid of the creature's uncontrollable swishing tail.

"A very thrillin' lesson ahead!" said Hagrid, while many of the students groaned.

"What' a matter with yeh all? Didn' yeh enjoy the last lesson?" inquired Hagrid, bewildered. They all shuffled their feet and even Harry couldn't think up anything encouraging to say.

"Oh, alrigh', alrigh'! I know it wasn' much fun. Still, today yeh'll see..."  
Hagrid trailed off gleefully, rubbing his hands together.

"So, what' are yeh waitin' for? Get a move on, toward' the clearing that I built fer yeh."

They were all herded towards the clearing, erected near the Forbidding Forest, dreading something unexpected.

When they neared the clearing, Harry saw that Hagrid had separated an area by building an enclosure near the Forbidden Forest.

Whatever the creature was, it must have been small as they weren't able to see anything, when they reached the clearing.

They all waited with bated breath and, Hagrid, noticing their undivided attention, went inside the Forest, returning with two real cute-looking creatures. They came to Hagrid's knees and were blinking in bewilderment. They had wings and beak like an eagle's and their lower half resembled a lion's body. The feathers along their back were black and those in the front were bronze and the wings were streaked with black and bronze. Their necks were variegated with dark blue feathers and their eyes gleamed as if they had their own fires blazing behind their pupils. And they were making deep trumpeting sounds, while tottering towards them.

Everyone sighed with relief, and all the girls became excited and squealy, including Pansy, who was jumping over the trolls for a better view, much to the annoyance of Draco.

-O-

***Pic: see the pictured by copy/pasting the link from the A/N.***

-O-

"ere're the Griffins. Mind, they're young, 'cause yeh can't catch 'em when they are all grown up." Hagrid gestured below his ears to show them their grown-up height.

"Now, who of yeh'll tell me abou' the Griffins?" asked Hagrid, surveying the students.

No surprises there, as Hermione started jumping on the balls of her feet much to the annoyance of Ron, who was standing behind her.

"Yes, Hermione," Hagrid said, his beard twitching.

As a television newscaster, Hermione started unloading her vast knowledge. "Griffins, also known as Gryphons, are part eagle and part lion. When they grow up they can be as large as wolves, having legs and claws like those of the lion and wings and beak like an eagle's and ears like horses. Griffins are very popular among the Magical Creatures because it has many virtues but no vices. Notable among the former are vigilance, courage and strength. That's why you can never catch a fully grown Griffin because they can even overcome Dragons, who are supposedly the most powerful magical creature," Hermione finished in her know-it-all tone.

Harry shook with silent laughter on Ron's irritation and jealous glances from the Slytherins. They still couldn't get over the fact that a Muggle-born witch could be so intelligent.

"Fifteen points ter Gryffindor," said Hagrid happily. "Griffins are known fer their strength, an' their feathers an' claws have special magical powers. Poisoned liquid changes color when they're served in a cup fashioned from a Griffin' claw," Hagrid provided.

"Yeh can all pat 'em 'cause they are very friendly an' all, but feed 'em well-the food I prepared meself that is," he said by pointing towards something very brown and muddy.

"Eyurgh," said Lavender, in disgust.

"I'm not touching *that*," Parvati said, cringing.

"Use ladles then," Hagrid shrugged, pointing towards the dippers.

"They can't feed 'emselve's 'cause they are young an' all... Alrigh', so, make groups o' four and wait fer yer turn."

Harry, Ron, Hermione and Neville made a group and headed for the first Griffin who was spreading its little wings and nibbling its tail with its beak.

"Ah! So cute!" Hermione exclaimed and others had to agree with her. They were adorable and looked totally harmless.

*So, what is Hagrid's point?* Harry thought, quite amused, because unless the animals had dangerous fangs, suckers or stings, Hagrid generally wasn't satisfied.

They fed the Griffin, who was named Scruffy-the other one was called Timbly for no apparent reason-some of the brown stuff.

Harry was stroking through Scruffy's feathers, much to the enjoyment of the young Griffin. Scruffy was looked at him very fondly and was rubbing its head at the sides of his right hand. Harry noticed that the blazing eyes of the Griffin had a life of their own and were very captivating.

They were having a very successful Care of Magical Creatures after a long time and everyone seemed to be enjoying it. Hagrid interjected some facts about the creature, like Godric Gryffindor's surname was derived from the name of the animal and the main qualities that the Gryffindors possessed were also shared by these creatures.

However, suddenly the cheery atmosphere and laughs faded away. They could clearly hear thumping noises coming from the forest. The ground shook beneath their feet and the whole class was swept with a wave of panic. Harry took out his wand and his friends followed his lead, preparing for whatever was approaching.

With sounds of trees crashing, a mammoth-sized head appeared between the gap of the parted trees near the clearing. Harry gave a shaky laugh and Hermione gave a frightened jump and hid herself behind Harry and Ron.

Ron gaped at Grawp, his mouth almost stretching to his neck.

"Ron, meet Mr. Grawp, Hagrid's little brother," said Harry humorously, but his voice was lost in the frenzy.

Harry's comment had no comparison whatsoever to the behavior of other students. The people he had known for years were suddenly acting like a bunch of chicken without heads. They were all

screaming like mad and running towards the school or heading towards Hagrid's hut for cover. Hagrid was trying to calm them down, but even his booming voice could not be heard above the bedlam.

"Haggar?" said Grawp with a stupid expression on his giant face.

"Grawpy, what are yeh doin' here? Go back inside!" said Hagrid in a worried voice.

"NO, Haggar," Grawp said relentlessly, looking down at his half-brother.

"What's the matter with yeh? Grawpy - go inside!" Hagrid repeated, launching his hands in the air and pointing them towards the forest like an oversized ballerina doing her last twirl on the dance floor.

"Haggar, see Krucky," said Grawp pointing towards some point in the Forbidden Forest while coming out of the bounds of the trees.

"WHAT?" Hagrid yelled.

Harry couldn't understand what was going on because Hagrid was looking like he was going to have a heart attack.

"Hagrid, what's the matter," asked Harry, but he didn't need an answer.

Another giant head appeared beside Grawp, taking a full fledged form of a female Giant. She was wearing dragon hide clothes, had jet black eyes and an unkempt mass of matching black hair. She was taller than Grawp and as round as he. She was looking from Grawp to Hagrid and to Grawp again, trying to find some resemblance.

"Oh Grawpy! Yeh sly ol' dog," Hagrid said wiping a tear.

Grawp smiled toothily, his rows and rows of yellowish teeth showing, while Krucky at that exact moment plucked a very disgruntled Bowtruckle from Grawp's hair. Grawp playfully jabbed at Krucky, grinning widely. It was another mystery altogether of how the Bowtruckle ended up in Grawp's hair in the first place.



Hermione looked bewildered, while Harry and Ron didn't have words to comment on the family reunion.

The Griffins were not at all afraid but were edging towards the giants with looks of amusement in their eyes. All the students had cleared up the area except Harry, Ron and Hermione and they were looking for some cue from Hagrid.

With Hagrid's smile, Grawp was encouraged as he came closer to him, closely followed by his female friend Krucky. Another fit of screaming sounded from the nearest trees as Malfoy and his gang went clambering towards the school.

"Hagrid, do something! They'll soon be coming back with professors," said Hermione in alarm.

Hagrid realized his slip-up as well and the gravity of the situation. He instantly acted and started nudging Grawp to go inside the forest. Grawp was enjoying the fresh air as it seemed and he didn't pay much attention to Hagrid's poking and jabbing.

He seemed more interested in Hermione, as he noticed her bushy head still cowering behind Ron. He hollered a big, "HERMY!" It was as though he had just met an old friend.

"Uh ... Hi," Hermione waved to him anxiously.

"He recognizes you?" said Ron in awe, but Hermione just rolled her eyes.

Krucky seemed highly amused at Hagrid as she observed him with much concentration. At last Hagrid was able to get Grawp's attention by poking him with a long branch of a tree.

"Grawpy, yeh don' wan' me in trouble, do yeh? Be a good boy and go ter yer restin' place," Hagrid said in a pleading voice.

Grawp had to register Hagrid's voice as he took Krucky's hand and parted the trees for departure with a desolate expression. Before completely disappearing from view, they heard him say, "Bye, Hagger."

Hagrid was all misty eyed and emotional, blowing his nose on his already dirty handkerchief.

"There, there, Hagrid," said Hermione, trying to cheer him up.

Timbly was on his way, following the giants, when Hagrid called the Griffin by making chirruping sounds.

"Yeh don' want to follow 'em, Timbly," said Hagrid affectionately, patting it on its beak.

Before they could ask, where this Krucky had arrived from, Dumbledore came striding towards them, closely followed by Professors McGonagall, Snape and Vidal.

"What's going on here?" asked Snape superiorly.

Dumbledore didn't say anything but his eyes were twinkling with knowledge. Harry could bet that Dumbledore knew all along that Grawp was residing in the Forbidden Forest.

"Come on, Hagrid, explain yourself," said McGonagall, fixing her steely gaze on him.

"Erm... Professor Dumbledore Sir, yeh know abou' me mother..." Hagrid trailed off.

"Rubeus, don't worry, we know about that; however, now the whole school knows and this can't be kept a secret any longer," said Dumbledore. "We have to prove that they will not hurt humans. So we have to contact the Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures. I daresay that there is no other way."

"They aren' gonna take him away, Dumbledore Sir?" Hagrid asked in a whisper.

"I don't want to give you any false hopes, Rubeus, but from the looks of it, Grawp seems to be on his way to being civilized." Dumbledore patted Hagrid's arm, hinting at the others to follow him back to the school with a gesture of his hand.

Hagrid looked hopeful, but still sulked towards his hut, while the others followed Dumbledore to the Entrance Hall.

"What will happen to Grawp, Professor?" asked Hermione anxiously.

"Let's hope for the best, shall we?" said Dumbledore, not giving another clue.

## - CHAPTER 10 - Muffin Potty (Part I) -

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As usual, the news about the Giants spread like a wildfire in the school. Amazingly, the *Daily Prophet* reported nothing, which they later found out by eavesdropping on Professor Vidal and Flitwick's conversation; it was all hush-hush until the full enquiries were made by the Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures.

Everyone was telling a different story. Harry heard snatches of conversation like:

"We had a Giant Squid in the Hogwarts Lake and now we have a real Giant in the forest! Geez, no wonder, my mother was skeptical about sending me to Hogwarts," said a first year Ravenclaw.

"What if the Giants came out and ate us alive?"-a second year Hufflepuff.

"What if they come out and destroy the buildings? I heard they have very strong magical powers."-a first year Gryffindor.

Harry just rolled his eyes to all this nonsense because he knew better. What enraged him the most, were the vicious lies spread by Slytherins. They were telling all and sundry-whoever cared to listen, that is-that Giants were nothing more than cruel killing machines.

Draco had a different version altogether. Harry heard his phony edition while sticking the announcement for Gryffindor Quidditch tryouts on the notice board of the Great Hall, hidden from view behind a suit of armor.

Draco Malfoy held the full attention of the Slytherin table as he described the lesson as if telling a mysterious tale. "I was enduring another one of those stupid lessons from that half-giant oaf, when suddenly this vicious monster-sized Giant comes out of the Forbidden Forest, roaring and beating its chest."

Harry imagined an ape doing that, not Grawp, even if his intellect was somewhere near the creature in question.

Draco animatedly continued, "And what'd you know? He wasn't alone! A Giantess accompanied him!" He paused for emphasis. "Everyone ran for their lives, but I stayed back and shot as many stunning spells as I could at the Giants," he said smugly. Harry could hear Crabbe and Goyle's grunts to approve this version of the story.

"And with my sole efforts, the Giants went scrambling back into the forest because..."-at this point his voice became all hushed up-"You know what did the trick? I used *Crucio* on them!" he finished triumphantly. A round of gasps followed, with a loud gleeful shriek from Pansy, who looked like she could have kissed Draco then and there, if Goyle wasn't sitting in between them.

Harry clenched his fists and cursed Malfoy under his breath to stop himself from doing something rash.

"And you know what? The Giants know Hagrid!" He paused and surveyed his spectators meaningfully. "I always thought that Hagrid should have been sacked years ago! That big stupid oaf with no brains has no right to teach us!" he finished airily.

At that point, it became quite impossible for Harry to bear Malfoy's insults, even if they weren't pointed towards him.

He strode like a lion towards his long-time nemesis, ready to pounce. "What did you do, Malfoy, when they came out? Did you scream at their faces to ward them off? Because, if I remember correctly, you were busy, squealing like a frightened pig!" Harry said scathingly.

"Shut your big mouth, Potty, before it's too late," Malfoy warned, taking out his wand.

However, Harry was too fast for him. He took out his wand in a flash, and in a fraction of a second, Draco had toppled off his seat and was lying on the floor clutching his head, the reason being its overgrowth as it was now shaped as a giant football minus hair. He couldn't get up because of the weight of his own head.

"Here's a gift for your over inflated ego, *Muffin*," Harry spat.

Everyone burst out laughing, including some Slytherins. Many students left their breakfasts just to see Malfoy being ridiculed. Pansy seemed livid as she shrieked rude words at Harry, while Crabbe and Goyle guffawed stupidly.

Harry muttered the counter curse in a hurry, seeing Professor McGonagall heading straight towards him.

"Potter, you will pay for this!" Malfoy said getting up and pointing his wand towards him.

"What is happening here? This is no dueling club!" Professor McGonagall yelled over the chattering students.

"Mr. Malfoy, what do you think you are doing?" she asked, quite taken aback by the situation.

"Potter attacked me, Professor!" Malfoy exclaimed.

On a very wild whim, Harry challenged Malfoy, "Can you prove it?"

"Are you joking, Potter? The whole school saw you hexing me!" Malfoy said, as if not believing his ears.

"Are you sure?" Harry whispered, his emerald eyes gleaming.

"I can prove that, Potter," said Pansy, coming to the rescue of her 'boyfriend', making Malfoy more smug than usual.

"I will say, Harry did no such thing," Ginny interrupted the discussion, shooting a wink at Harry. Harry couldn't help but grin at her.

Professor McGonagall whereas, was huffing in the background. "You two share your houses with Malfoy and Potter. So you would surely side by them," she said looking disapprovingly at Pansy and Ginny.

"Well, if it means anything, Professor, I saw Malfoy pointing a wand at Potter, not otherwise," Cho chimed in as if waiting for a cue. Luna followed suit as she also sided with Harry.

"Yes, Professor, I only saw Harry defending Hagrid's honor," Ernie Macmillan provided, smiling at Harry, which was followed by an audible murmur of consent from the majority of the crowd.

Harry couldn't believe his luck, Ravenclaw and Hufflepuff were siding with him, while Malfoy stared on, totally ashen-faced.

"I will let this incident pass. However, there will be no future wand waving in the Great Hall, and if I ever see a student taking out his wand even to polish it, he'll be doomed for whole month's worth of detention! Is that understood by all of you?" she said glaring daggers at every student.

"Now run along! You are getting late for your classes," Professor McGonagall barked.

"That was ruddy brilliant, Harry," Ron said gleefully, almost skipping on his feet, as they made their way out of the Great Hall. However, he had to straighten his posture as Hermione was giving the same look Professor McGonagall used not minutes ago.

"Harry, you could have gotten detention for that!" Hermione chastised.

"Oh lighten up, Hermione! Malfoy was insulting Hagrid, and I can never take that!" Harry said simply, shrugging his shoulders, while feeling a bit light-hearted.

-x-

*Oh, Brave Harry Potter! Let me shake your hand, Harry Potter! Let me polish your shoes, Harry Potter! Let me kiss your arse, Harry Potter...*

*For Merlin's sake! These people make me sick. Now the whole school thinks he's Godric reincarnate!*

*It's becoming difficult to carry out my plans; these faithful loyalists of his are everywhere!*

*But I will get you soon... Harry Potter.*

-x.X.x-



## **- CHAPTER 10 - Muffin Potty (Part II) -**

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Harry had discussed the Quidditch tryouts with Katie in detail, but he wasn't sure about the speech to encourage his team-mates. Katie had very easily delegated the responsibility to him and it had seemed all right to do so in the beginning, but when the final moment was near, he wasn't sure about speaking what Oliver had advised him in his foot long letter or to speak whatever rubbish that came into his mind.

"Harry, let's get going, mate!" Ron hollered from behind the changing booth.

"Coming," he said, fastening his Quidditch gear.

Harry and Ron made their way to the Quidditch pitch. Katie was waiting for him along with the tryout students. Harry felt a calming sensation seep over him by looking at the familiar hoops and stands.

There was quite a turnout for the tryouts. Officially they were looking for two Chasers, but Harry knew that Ginny would easily be the next Chaser for the team, bringing the selection to one Chaser short.

"Seamus, you are trying out too?" asked Ron amazed, after spotting him in the small group.

"Yeah! I practiced myself to death in holidays," Seamus said sheepishly.

"Why is Dean not trying out?" asked Harry, remembering him to be an athletics fan.

"He said he's got more important things to do," said Seamus, looking unsure.

Euan Abercrombie, Tara Johnson, Ryan Brad, Seamus Finnegan and Ginny Weasley were standing in a group, chatting with the current team-mates, while the Captains, Harry and Katie waited for their Beaters-Jack Sloper and Andrew Kirk-to show up.

"Where are those stupid fools!" Katie Bell asked impatiently.

"I specifically reminded them, but they are still making us late," said Harry, shaking his head.

After another five minutes, they saw two bungling figures staggering towards them.

"Sorry, Captain... er... Captains," said Andrew looking uncomfortable.

"I'm no 'Captain,' call me Harry,"

"Yes, Katie-" Katie interjected.

"-as others do," Harry finished.

"What took you so long?" Katie continued indignantly.

"Umm, got lost on the way," Jack supplied feebly. Harry looked at them in disbelief and Ron didn't even try to hide his snort.

Harry nudged Katie to break the news to Tara and Ryan that they were not allowed to play because of the first-year rule.

"But he was selected on his first year," said Tara Johnson, pointing her finger at Harry and stomping her foot.

"You are Angelina's sister, aren't you?" asked Harry, smiling at her.

"Yes," Tara said blushing, realizing late that it wasn't nice to point finger at others.

"Well now we know where to look next year. But you have to understand that there were some special circumstances in my case. You two are already aware of the wizarding community situation and how there is still a tussle going on. So we have to follow the official rules more than ever. You don't want more parents complaining about Hogwarts standards, do you?" Harry asked them politely.

"Well, no," they almost said in unison.

"So cheer up, try out next year, all right?" Katie said encouragingly.

"Alright."

"Fine," they said and started for the school grounds, their heads bowed.

"Ahh, it's so sad, looking at their long faces," said Katie.

"Yeah," said Harry, looking after the two small figures.

*"Speech time,"* Katie whispered in his ear, while he scowled at her.

"All right everyone, you all know why we are here." This seemed too dramatic even for a tryout, so he skipped beating about the bush and went straight to the point. "As we will only be selecting the Chasers, we'll begin the play with Quaffle alone. With half an hour interval, the Bludgers will be released one after the other. Beaters will enter the play when the first Bludger is released. The finalists will be chosen on the basis of their performance and scored goals."

He continued with a pause, "Ginny, Seamus and Euan, you three will be playing as a team today, whereas Katie and I will act as the opposing team Chasers to block your path. This is not going to be too difficult, as you will only have two Chasers to block you rather than three and the Bludgers come quite late in the game, giving you free reign to goal and also no Seeker hovering over your heads. But obviously there will be Ron, the Keeper, to stop your goals."

"Any questions?" asked Katie, but there were none.

"Mount your brooms, and get into your respective positions," Harry said, hitting off from the ground on his Firebolt.

Katie released the Quaffle and started following the three tryout Chasers along with Harry.

Ginny was playing very nicely in spite of her Cleansweep. Seamus was doing a good job too on his Nimbus 2000. Euan was only lacking in weight as he was easily thrown off balance by a light shove.

Ron was completely in form and didn't let pass a single goal in the first half hour.

Ginny in frustration yelled at him, "Budge up, Ron, it's only a tryout!"

Ron only grinned evilly in response. At that exact moment Harry bumped into Seamus to snatch the Quaffle but wasn't ready for Ginny to come crashing towards him headlong. He dropped the Quaffle because of the sudden attack, and became entwined with Ginny in the process. Her blouse-lace got stuck into Harry's broom compass.

Harry yelled, "Continue with the game, we'll soon join you."

Harry wasn't able to see the mischievous grin on Ron's face at their disposition. They had to get down to the pitch to untangle.

"I'm so sorry," said Ginny looking embarrassed and trying her best to untie the lace but to no avail.

Harry's stomach was filled with all kinds of butterflies and what not. Suddenly, he felt as if his guts had evaporated and there was nothing left except air... *Ginny so close... She looks so beautiful when she gets embarrassed, all red and blushing, just like her hair...* Harry wasn't helping her untie the laces from his broom but was staring intently at her.

*Say something, bonehead, or the moment will pass!* he thought, the clogs of his brain crashing together to come up with something.

"Err... Ginny..." he started.

"Yes, Harry," she answered politely, realizing belatedly that Harry was paying too much attention to her.

Harry was edging close to her and seeing no resistance, was just about to kiss her when a spell hit him straight at the back. On the next blink of an eye he was lying on the ground, stiff as a board.

In the next second, Ginny muttered the counter curse and Harry straightened up to see Draco Malfoy sauntering towards him with his cronies in tow.

"How lovey dovey, Potter!" Draco said smirking.

"None of your business!" Harry retorted angrily.

*Scrupulosa!"* Draco yelled.

*"Protego!"* incanted Harry, the shield protected him from being hit fully.

*"Cruc-"*

*"Obscurio!"* Harry yelled again, before Draco could finish his spell.

The whole Gryffindor team came down to laugh their heads off at Draco's clumsiness, because due to the spell, he was swaggering about the Quidditch pitch cross-eyed.

"Oh what a beautiful sight," said Ron, wiping a tear.

Ginny got over the awkward moment that couldn't transpire and was smiling at the scene as well. Ron's eyes were twinkling more than ever.

As if their laughter aggravated the very air; like a bad omen, the entire Slytherin Quidditch team sashayed in the pitch, all dressed up in their Quidditch gear.

"What are they doing here?" Ron enquired incredulously to nobody in particular.

"I booked the pitch for tryouts; they have no right to be here," said Katie angrily.

"Let's get ready for some trouble," said Ron, folding his arms.

"Hello, Potter," said Warrington, showing his crooked teeth.

"It's still our time at the pitch, because we have booked it. So, why are you here? Because our presumed match is not due till next month," Harry said in his collected voice.

"The thing is, Potter... we've got special permission from Professor Snape that we *can* use the pitch... just right about now!" he said, snorting on Harry's face.

"Oh buzz off, Warrington!" said Ron threateningly, but Harry restrained him from taking another step.

"What's the excuse this time, Warrington? Who are you training now?" Katie said, pouting at him.

"Well, our new team Captain has some important strategies to discuss, and we also have to train our new Chaser, Malcolm Baddock," Warrington answered.

By that time, Malfoy had come back to his senses and came sprinting towards them boiling in rage. "You've made a grave mistake, Potter! You don't know what I can do to you!" he said menacingly, pointing his wand at him.

"I'm getting scared now, Malfoy. Look! One of my eye-lash is twitching in fear," said Harry, looking straight at Draco levelly.

Malfoy scoffed, lowering his wand, while Warrington took his cue and announced, "Meet our new Captain, Potter, Draco Malfoy."

Harry gave Draco a killer smile. "This is such a good news; congratulation Muffin-man! Let's hope I'll meet you on our first match?" Harry said, raising an eyebrow.

Draco raised his wand at Harry yet again. However, he knew that he couldn't use the Unforgivables in front of all these students; therefore, he delayed his retaliation with a smirk. "See you then, Potty!"

"Muffin!" Harry acknowledged with a smirk of his own and turned to his team-mates.

"As you've got special permission, Malfoy, why don't use it well?" Katie quipped sarcastically.

"Let's get going, mates," Ron said ushering all of them to their changing room. On their way, Katie informed Harry that Seamus was the only one who was able to goal before they were disturbed by the Slytherins.

The decision was not that difficult, the Captains, along with the team members, unanimously selected Seamus and Ginny as their new Chasers.

Euan was a complete sport, as he didn't mind at all. "I know I'm a little light for a Chaser; I could've been the Seeker, but Harry is brilliant as it is," he said, smiling at him.

The team was set and Harry was all geared up for their coming match. As his departing speech after many nudges from Katie he said, "All right team, we have been winning the Quidditch Cup since last two seasons, and obviously we want to do it again, but it is not possible without the total team effort. I know I can't expect you to only concentrate on Quidditch because we all have our studies to think about too. However, we *can* be the best team ever, if we only *practice*," he paused for a moment and heard Andrew and Jack groan.

"Katie and I will be conducting practice sessions three times a week because we have already been delayed and we only have a month to get in shape. I know some of you are cursing me under your breath, and I was one of you not long ago. Still, I know now what Oliver and Angelina went through to assemble all the plus points of the team." He surveyed his team-mates, whose faces were set. "Let's meet tomorrow, same time, for the first practice of the season," Harry finished.

"Yeah, let's practice tough and hard, and kick some Slytherin butt!" Ron roared.

"Hear, hear," they all said in unison.

-X-

With October came Lupin and Harry's Advanced Training classes. Lupin was more than over-whelmed to return to Hogwarts.

With Harry's advanced classes, he was also almost badgered to death for starting the DA meetings earlier than he had expected. So he had to relent and make time for them as well, and was completely flabbergasted to find that almost everyone wanted to join in except, of course, the Slytherins-the rumor had it that they were already getting training from Malfoy and some of the seventh-year students.

To solve this dilemma, Dumbledore and Lupin came to his rescue and whoever wanted to join the DA classes were scheduled to be

taught by either Professor Lupin or Flitwick in preliminary defense. In the case of the advanced classes, which included their first DA members of the last term except Marietta Edgecombe, Harry would be teaching them, along with Lupin, the first-hand techniques to uphold their safety.

The days wore on and Harry was exhausted more than ever because he not only had to plan Quidditch practices with Katie and DA meetings, but also had to work hard for his sixth year, preparing for the N.E.W.Ts and the unexpected tasks ahead. His sleep wasn't restful either, as he kept on dreaming about that unknown place with thick walls, and the white shimmering light with the sweet voice continued to tickle his curiosity.

-x.X.x-



## CHAPTER 11 - To Vanquish the Serpent -

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*Harry was back again at that place where nothing existed except pure shimmering white light... Again, the colors were pulsing all around him, and this time he could hear someone humming:*

***Let those who rest more deeply sleep,  
Let those awake their vigils keep...***

*With each spoken word, the colors around him changed. He tried to glimpse something, anything, but could see nothing except the white light. When he became restless and started shifting, the humming voice faltered for a little bit, but the voice still kept on humming the song or incantation, whatever it was, over and over again.*

*And Harry again realized that the voice was very familiar, so familiar that he couldn't put his finger on it.*

*"What do you think you are doing?" the same voice brandished.*

*Harry was quite taken aback by the authoritative tone of the voice. He felt as though being caught while unscrupulously snooping around that he involuntarily flipped as if in air. With that the scene changed-yet again a smoky snake was charging at him, baring its fangs and this time it was able to sting him on his forehead-just where his scar was.*

He felt no pain but a strange sensation seeped through his body, like actual venom was passing through his veins; he writhed in an unknown agony and woke up clutching his scar. Somehow, he knew that the mixing up of these dreams wasn't a good sign; this was no prediction but a feeling he couldn't explain.

He tossed around in his bed for a comfortable position, burying his face in his pillow, willing himself to sleep but to no avail. His scar wasn't hurting anymore and he wondered what woke him up if it wasn't the scar.

After many minutes of relentless tossing around and no appearance of sleep, he got up seeing the first rays of sunshine flitting through the window.

He got off the bed and pulled his jumper over him because of the chilly weather. He was pulling on his socks when his gaze fixed on his faintly gleaming Firebolt near the window. His stomach did a somersault when he remembered that today was the first Quidditch match of the season against Slytherin. That's why he was all hyped up last night and had slept late. *Was this the reason behind seeing that dream again? And who that voice belonged to? It sounded so familiar...*

He suddenly had the urge to talk to somebody and he had almost opened the side drawer to get the mirror that Lupin had given him but he realized that he didn't want to disturb him so early in the morning. So instead, he caught up on his homework which was bloating out of proportion.

When it was all rise and shine, he nudged Ron and Seamus awake from their slumber. When Ron saw him through his groggy eyes, he bolted upright so fast that his head hit the canopy of the four-poster bed.

"Oww," Ron yowled painfully.

"Oh c'mon, Ron! The match hasn't even started yet," Harry said playfully.

Harry knew that this time it was different, not because he was the Co-Captain but because Ron was playing even above Wood's standards and their Chasers were more than just fit; their team had everything except for a glitch called Andrew and Jack. The players had to save themselves from the Bludgers because the Beaters were either too absorbed in other things on the field-picking their noses or beating the Bludgers towards their own team-mates-rather than towards the opposing team. Oh how Harry sorely missed the twins and their brilliant beating!

He had a wistful expression on his face and Ron could read it right through, while coming from the bath. "Thinking about the blundering gits?" he asked, snickering and throwing his towel at him.

Harry made a face and answered, "You are there to save us, aren't you, Weasley King?" He threw back the towel on Ron's bed.

"Oi!" said Ron warningly and raced down with Harry to the common room where Ginny and Hermione were waiting for them.

Hermione raised an eyebrow and Ginny smiled, amused at the two boys crashing down the steps.

"All set for the match?" asked Hermione.

Harry was going to answer, "Yes," when he heard a crash and was knocked down beneath a heap comprising of Andrew and Jack. They were all arms and legs and Harry was squirming to get free.

Everyone burst out laughing-seeing the Gryffindor Captain, *Mister Boy-Who-Lived*, trampled by two lumbering figures.

"Gerroff!" he yelled from somewhere beneath.

"Sorry, boss!" said Jack, accentuating it with a goofy grin.

Harry straightened up and almost howled at them, "What are you two trying to prove? And I'm no 'boss', I'm simply Harry!"

"Sorry, Harry," Jack said earnestly, straightening his robes.

"Just slipped," Andrew interjected hopefully.

Harry just rolled his eyes in indignation, clearly saying, '*Oh why me?*'

Hermione was still chortling with laughter, while Ron and Ginny eyed her reprovably.

"Well, Hermione, we'll be okay," said Harry, answering her belatedly, which produced another fit of giggles from her.

"What are we going to do, mate?" asked Ron, ruffling his hair absent-mindedly.

"I miss Fred and George," said Ginny longingly, putting Harry's thoughts into words.

"We have practiced a lot; let's just hope that no Bludger smacks my head," said Harry, expecting the worst.

"Then we'll surely be doomed!" Ron said whistling, as an after thought he added, "And Merlin save us from the tweedleedum and tweedleedoo!"

-X-

Breakfast was a quiet affair and everyone was waiting in anticipation for the first Quidditch match. All the Gryffindors were wearing red and gold mufflers and many Hufflepuff and Ravenclaw students were cheering the Gryffindors too.

Harry felt a pang when he saw Cho wearing the Gryffindor muffler and his gaze was followed by Ginny, because of which he somehow felt ashamed.

He wasn't really hungry, so he just ate a piece of toast, and by looking at the worried faces of his team-mates, he completely lost his appetite. The only players who were eating like pigs were Andrew and Jack-they were eating like there was no tomorrow.

Katie gave him a worried look to which he only shrugged.

*I hope they don't throw up,* Harry thought optimistically.

-X-

They all got ready for the match in the changing room. Everyone was eyeing everybody else and exceptionally long stares were reserved for Andrew and Jack a.k.a tweedleedum and tweedleedoo.

Katie was smiling faintly towards Harry, encouraging him for a speech but he shook his head and pointed at her to have a go. They were all standing before the entrance, waiting for a cue from Madam Hooch.

"Okay, Gryffindors. After long and hard practices we have reached the first step towards the Quidditch Cup. And I know that there is a lot of pressure for maintaining the winning streak. But, Harry and I have decided that we'll never sink low to any foul play, just because we want to win. We will win with all the right moves, following all the rules, if not, no matter, because winning is not everything. However, I'm confident that with our team effort, we'll be able to hit another high,"

Katie finished looking in the eyes of the team members and Harry could almost feel their face set and their grips tighten on their broomsticks with determination.

"Let's get this over with," said Harry and they all exchanged a group high-five, with cries of, "Yeah," and, "Let's do this!" they all headed for the Quidditch pitch at the sound of Madam Hooch's whistle.

"Welcome! Students and respected professors, to the first Quidditch match of the season! And, what a fine day for a match! There is no wind as the air stands still with freezing coldness. The match between two opponents from so many years before that even Professor Binns is not sure about the exact dates: Slytherin versus Gryffindor. Let's hear it for the teams!"

Both the teams rushed out of their respective entrances towards the pitch.

"Look, it's Dean commentating!" Seamus said, pointing towards the high stands, while Dean smiled and waved to all of them.

"So this is the important thing he was doing," Harry concluded.

Madam Hooch, as usual, was standing in the center of the pitch. "Now, I want a nice and clean game, boys and girls!" she warned them all. "So watch your backs!"

With a pause she continued, "Captains shake hands."

This was the moment Harry was most dreading. Harry could almost hear many intakes of breaths as both the team Captains drew nearer to each other. Katie had already swore roughly at Malfoy and told him that she'd spend a day with Giant Squid in the lake instead of shaking hands with *that* pointy-faced git. So even if he hated Malfoy more, he wasn't able to sway Katie and had to give in.

Draco was smirking so hard that his eyes were not even visible and Harry was not going to be the first one to relent.

"C'mon, boys, we don't have all day!" Madam Hooch barked at them.

"After you, Potter," Draco said with a facsimile, but Harry didn't budge.

"Let's not waste time, Malfoy, or are you scared now?" asked Harry, raising an eyebrow.

"In your dreams, Potter!" Draco sneered and before Madam Hooch could scold them again, they shook hands so briefly that their hands barely touched.

"Mount your brooms," Madam Hooch ordered. They all did so and with the sound of the whistle and a round of applause, fourteen broomsticks shot into the air.

"They are OFF! And a very *spanking*-"

"Thomas!" warned Professor McGonagall. As always, she was watching over the commentating.

"Sorry, Professor... A very *thrilling* match right here, people. And the Quaffle is released and... Baddock lunges for the Quaffle but misses. Some excellent moves there, Bell; she's now in possession."

Harry was hovering around the pitch but no glint of gold was visible. He groaned involuntarily seeing Malfoy following him closely.

As the Quaffle was passed from player to player, Harry noticed that from the onset of the game, a difference was evident in the Slytherin team. Their Chasers were bumping and shoving more than usual and as they were going, a penalty seemed to be in order very soon.

"Weasley in possession and she is streaking so nicely towards the goal posts... Come on, Ginny!" Dean egged Ginny on, while Bletchley, the Slytherin Keeper looked murderous.

"She ducks, shoots... and SCORES!"

The crowd went wild on the first goal and Harry could hear the Gryffindors screaming in approval; they started waving a banner showing a huge lion swallowing a giant snake.

"Gryffindor: ten to zero," Dean announced happily.

Harry whooped with joy; however, ducked at the right time as a Bludger just zoomed past him brushing his sleeve.

"Pucey is at it again, closely followed by Finnigan. Go, GO, Seamus, knock him off his broom!"

"THOMAS!" yelled Professor McGonagall warningly.

"Erm... Finnigan successfully passes the Quaffle to Bell but... Oh no, a Bludger knocked the Quaffle from her hand to Warrington, shot by... uh... Sloper?" At this point Dean's voice had bewilderment written all over it.

"Warrington's heading for the goal posts and it's time for Ron Weasley, circling the hoops like an over-obsessive hen, to show his true colors."

The crowd screamed more wildly as Ron was able to save the goal and smirk in return, while Warrington showed him his fists.

"A sign of professional Quidditch right here people, as we see the *Hawkshead Attacking Formation* by the Gryffindor Chasers."

All the three Chasers came together in a tight group. Seamus was in the lead, heading for the goal posts, while Ginny and Katie flew close by. Bletchley was circling the hoops, not sure what to expect as Seamus passed the Quaffle to Katie and she arched like she was about to throw it towards the right hoop, Bletchley calculated wrongly and Katie in a flash passed the Quaffle to Seamus, who made for the middle hoop and scored successfully.

"Gryffindor scores *again*, GO SEAMUS!" Dean almost danced about the stand. "And it's Gryffindor: twenty to zero."

From the looks of it, the match was going in Gryffindor's favor because Ron hadn't allowed a single goal to the Slytherins. It was like he was back with a vengeance.

"Baddock's heading for the goal posts as Crabbe and Goyle band with him. What are they trying to do? Oh no, I smell trouble!"

There was an audible groan from the audience as Crabbe and Goyle both shot Bludgers at Ron at the same time from opposite sides, so that he was almost sandwiched between them. He was knocked backwards from his broom and if his grip hadn't been tight enough on his broomstick, he would have fallen straight towards the ground.

"FOUL, FOUL,FOUL!" screamed Dean, jumping around the stand.

"Penalty!" cried Madam Hooch.

"Thomas, continue with the commentating, will you!" warned Professor McGonagall, staring worriedly at Ron's heaving body.

"But, Professor, that was BRUTAL!" Dean complained.

"Anyways with that foul play, Slytherins *finally* score," said Dean, accusingly. "So, it's ten to twenty to Gryffindor."

A timeout was called by Harry and in the frenzy of flying towards Ron along his team-mates; he didn't notice that Malfoy was streaking wildly towards something. As Madam Hooch accepted his timeout, Malfoy caught the Snitch and was showing it off to the public with an evil grin on his face.

A sudden hush soaked the entire Quidditch pitch, and it seemed that nobody was present and if there had been any frogs in the pitch, they would have clearly heard their croaking in the abrupt silence that followed.

"I CAUGHT THE SNITCH!" yelled Malfoy, looking ecstatic.

"But, Mr. Malfoy, the timeout was already called; the game was in recess," Madam Hooch said in a calm voice.

"So what? I caught the Snitch, didn't I? And that means that the game is over," Malfoy said with a blank stare.

"I think I'm not getting through to you, Mr. Malfoy! The game was in recess, so, even if you catch the Snitch thousand times in a timeout, it wouldn't matter!" Madam Hooch bristled, getting all perked up.



Harry sighed in relief. *Oh boy! That was too close!*

Draco Malfoy on the other hand, let go of the Snitch and started cursing so loudly that Madam Hooch gave the Slytherins another penalty, which shut Malfoy up for good.

The crowd settled down with relief that the game was indeed, not over. Harry noticed a very bushy-haired bobbing up and down in the Gryffindor stands in concern. He didn't know that Hermione was either getting all worked up over Ron getting hurt or the match in dwindles.

In the meantime, Ron was examined by Madam Pomfrey, who was pursing her lips so tight that they seemed white. "Quidditch! I tell you..." she was muttering.

Ron just had some bruises which were healed by the Matron in a jiffy.

Before resuming the game, Harry had a little chat with Katie and his team-mates by getting a cue from the Slytherins, as they were all huddled in a corner of the pitch conspiring something.

"That was so close, Harry! What were you thinking?" asked Ron horrified.

"Looking after your butt, Ronniekins!" retorted Harry, producing a very red faced Ron.

"Jack, Andrew, try to shoot the Bludgers towards Slytherin for a change, will you? And I know I was lousy, so I'll keep a better lookout."

Harry was interrupted by Katie, "No, you weren't, Harry. Look at the Slytherins though, it seems that they will be using some of their non-professional tactics, so beware," Katie warned everybody, finishing with a smile of camaraderie.

The game resumed with a thunder of applause from the crowd. As Madam Hooch had called two penalties, Katie was chosen for the first and Seamus for the second, they both succeeded, making the Gryffindors lead with thirty points.

As Dean pointed out, the Slytherins were definitely getting more desperate by the moment as they kept on bungling through the game.

"Ouch! Tough luck there, Pucey! As he's hit by Kirke's first successful Bludger," Dean announced happily.

It had been one and a half hour to the game and Gryffindor was still leading thirty to seventy. The audience was completely hooked, as they oohed and aaahed at the right places and moves.

"Bell in possession, as she veers around Warrington and Crabbe heading for the goal posts and ducks just in time from the Bludger sent by Goyle and passes along to Weasley, who in turn heads for the right hoop but shoots to the left and SCORES! Oh how brilliant! She was feinting. Gryffindors lead: thirty to eighty," Dean said in an over-excited voice.

Harry was scanning the ground for the Snitch. "Oh come out already!" he muttered desperately, as this time he was ready for it.

On his next scan, he saw Malfoy again getting all excited and diving for the ground. Harry followed suit but he couldn't see the Snitch.

"The Seekers have seen the Snitch and are now battling to catch it first. GO, Harry! Make Gryffindors proud!" Dean yelled over the excited chattering.

As Harry came nearer to the ground he saw a glint of gold not in front of Malfoy but on the other side of the pitch. "Damn you, Malfoy!" he yelled, as he swerved his Firebolt to the left with difficulty as he was flying very near to the ground.

"Ooooh that was a difficult maneuver, but Potter swiftly veers around for another point... But what is he doing?" Dean exclaimed as the audience got to their feet and many students pressed their Omnioculars to their eyes for a better look.

"Potter has seen the Snitch! Malfoy git was only feinting!" Dean shouted and Professor McGonagall was so absorbed in the game that she didn't even yell, "THOMAS" for a change.

As Malfoy realized that his ploy of distraction has backfired, he raced after Harry increasing his speed rapidly.

Harry had already covered half the distance and was leaning on his broomstick to increase the speed even more. The game stood stock still, as all the players abandoned their posts and were observing the Seekers, except Crabbe and Goyle who sent the Bludgers flying towards Harry, one of which only grazed him, but the second one hit his right shoulder squarely.

Harry howled in pain but still didn't lessen his speed.

"That was so unfair!" Dean bellowed. "Even with that, the Gryffindor Captain is narrowing down towards the Snitch, as it flutters some paces away from him," Dean announced excitedly.

And within a few heartbeats, Harry held out his left hand for catching the Snitch, closely followed by Malfoy, who was huffing and breathing hard to get past Harry; however, Harry was too quick for him.

The Snitch fluttered just past his fingers mocking him; Firebolt got the better side of the Snitch, and with a sigh of relief Harry enclosed the golden fluttering ball in his left hand as he headed for the ground by navigating the broomstick with his legs, unsupported-as his right hand was in no condition to hold anything.

The Gryffindor supporters cheered, jumped and yelled with triumph; however obviously the Slytherins were doing the opposite, heading for the school, heads bowed and scowling.

Harry's fellow Gryffindors made for him in a wave of robes and broomsticks and he was almost swallowed by their hulking figures, hugging him tightly. Harry felt contented after a long time. However, just before being completely swallowed by his team-mates, he saw a very familiar face in the nearest stand... *It can't be!* he thought. *That can't be Sirius!*

"Gryffindor Captain saves the day! And Gryffindor WINS by two hundred points," Dean danced around the stand cheering while the thundering applause almost buried his voice.

"Harry! I knew you could do it," Ron said supporting Harry on his shoulder with the help of Andrew and Jack. Harry saw that there was no Sirius in the nearest stand.

*What is wrong with me? Why am I seeing things?* he thought, while he was carried around the pitch by his team-mates, quite proudly. Madam Pomfrey reached them in between their circulation and demanded that Harry was handed over to her for healing.

As it turned out, his shoulder joint was dislocated, however, Madam Pomfrey did a nifty spell and healed it, only leaving a little swelling and pain, for which he was ordered to take Strengthening Potion for three days.

"See you all in the dormitory," Harry said to his team-mates and headed for the Hospital Wing for his health potion, still in his Quidditch gear, wondering what was wrong with his sight.

-x.X.x-

## - CHAPTER 12 - Expecting the Unexpected (Part I) -

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As he came out from the Hospital Wing he saw Ginny waiting for him, which made him gladder than even winning the match.

"How are you feeling, Harry?" Ginny asked, and then blurted out hurriedly, "Everyone was getting worried about you, so they sent me to look for you."

*Why she's explaining all this? Or she was the one who was worried sick?* he reflected, amused. This thought made him stand a little straighter than usual-tough luck there, as it made him grimace in pain.

"No matter, Ginny, I'm feeling all right," he said, wincing.

"You don't look too good," said Ginny surveying him closely, as Harry was mustering up his courage to do the thing he had been aching to do for quite long... Instead, he doubled over in surprising pain as his insides went up in flame. It was so painful that he couldn't maintain his balance and keeled over on the floor.

Ginny was taken by surprise, still she started screaming for help immediately as she kneeled down beside him and shot a red sparkling spell towards the Hospital Wing. Harry was rolling on his sides in agony, gasping for breath.

"Giiiiinniii," he muttered in pain.

Madam Pomfrey came running and gasped in surprise seeing Harry twisting in agony. "What happened to him?"

"I don't know! He was just talking and- and this-" Ginny motioned towards him with a trembling voice.

Madam Pomfrey checked him and gasped again. "Oh no! How could this be?" She frantically checked him over to make sure.

"Miss Weasley, will you be able to move him towards the Hospital Wing?" asked Madam Pomfrey hurriedly.

"Yes, I can," Ginny answered and enunciated, "*Mobilicorpus!*"

Harry's writhing body started hovering in the air. Ginny pointed her wand at him and started running towards the Hospital Wing after the Matron as gracefully as she could without bumping his body anywhere.

Madam Pomfrey did a freezing charm on Harry, which froze his floating body in an instant into a white grimacing statue.

"What did you do that for?" asked Ginny in surprise.

"Just wait for a bit Miss Weasley, and don't go calling to your friends... at least not right now." This made Ginny even more bewildered.

Ginny helplessly watched Harry's frozen body. She couldn't understand, but whenever something was about to happen between them, something always went wrong, ruining it. She had gotten over her puppy-love in her third year, but from the time Harry had arrived at Grimmauld Place, he had acted quite differently towards her. She had noticed him watching her and the small hope that had died was suddenly pushing forward to rise from the ashes.

Madam Pomfrey was fretting in her office and Ginny followed her. She was bringing down many old grimy bottles and was dusting their exteriors. She beckoned a book to open, using *Accio*. She read a page and brought down a very ancient carafe from a shelf and read its label closely. She opened the bottle and sniffed it, when satisfied, she ordered Ginny to go to the Staff Room and bring Professor McGonagall with her.

"Can I bring Ron?" Ginny asked pleadingly but got a very curt, "NO," in response.

Harry was revived to his own self by the time Ginny arrived with Professor McGonagall panting behind with her walking stick.

"What's the matter, Poppy?" she asked worriedly.

"There has been an awful misfortune, Minerva. Someone broke into my office and changed the contents of a healing potion, which I use profusely and in a hurry I didn't check that it was the right potion or

not... and look what happened," she finished pointing towards Harry with a dry sob.

Harry was unaware of the whole process because he only remembered being frozen after that excruciating flaming sensation rocked his insides. When he was unfrozen, he didn't feel any pain; however, he soon realized that his lower body was still frozen. Madam Pomfrey made him drink a solution, which was icy blue in color and as he gulped it down, he felt a cold sensation seep through his body-colder than the ice covering half of his body.

After a wait of almost five minutes, Madam Pomfrey unfroze him completely and Harry didn't feel a single pang of pain after that.

"Are you sure, Poppy?" asked Professor McGonagall after looking at Harry skeptically.

"Yes, I am sure! I gave Potter the right quantity of *Meroceli Potion* for his swelling but it turned out that it was *Flammilo Potion* instead, and if it hadn't been for Miss Weasley here, Potter would have sustained permanent repercussions," Madam Pomfrey replied, shuddering at the thought.

"Who could have done such a thing?" asked Ginny.

"Flammilo Potion is a very advanced potion, Miss Weasley, and it's not a part of Hospital supplies. Am I right, Poppy?" Professor McGonagall asked the Matron.

"Yes, certainly," Madam Pomfrey answered earnestly.

"This is the work of a very crafty wizard or witch, who not only broke into the Matron's office, but was successfully able to hoodwink her," said McGonagall looking livid.

"Poppy, verify all the draughts and potions in your supply for their credibility. I have to report this to the Headmaster and, Potter, do you know anything about this that I'm not aware of? Because you always seem to know more than you reveal," said Professor McGonagall, looking sternly at him.

Harry looked towards Ginny for support who shrugged in response. He wasn't sure that the note that he received when he was ill had anything to do with this incident or not.

"I don't know, Professor..." he trailed off, looking truthfully nonplussed.

"Very well, Potter, but do tell me if you find anything... that means everything you find. Understood, Potter?" Her voice was firm but her eyes were filled with concern. "There are already many wizards on prowl for you."

"Yes, Professor," Harry said obediently.

"Just have a lie-in for an hour, Potter, so that I can observe the result of the medication," said the Matron.

"Now, can I go and get my brother?" Ginny asked hopefully.

Before Madam Pomfrey could say anything Harry replied, "No, Ginny, don't worry them. I'm feeling fine. You can stall by saying that I'm with Professor Lupin... all right? I don't want to disturb them in their merry making," he finished, thinking about all the Gryffindors partying in the common room.

Ginny gave him an appraising look and smiled. "You gave me a heart attack just then, Harry. I thought you were taken over or something," she said, shaking her head.

"I'm fine now," he said smiling back and thinking what was with his fate? The moment he wanted to start something with Ginny, something unexpected happened...

"All right, Miss Weasley, you can go now, he's feeling better and needs rest after being injured and inflamed in a single day," said Madam Pomfrey quite pointedly.

"Okay... I guess I'll leave you now," said Ginny, kissing Harry on the cheek and went away hurriedly. Harry could guess, even without looking at her that she was blushing.

-X-



The one hour shuteye changed into two hours and when he finally woke up, he was feeling fresh as a punch. He noticed another thing, he was not alone. Ron, Hermione and Ginny were there, sitting beside his bed.

"Feeling all right?" asked Hermione.

"Yes, not bad at all," Harry said stretching, while checking the functionality of his hands and limbs-all seemed to be in order.

"So, how's the party going?" Harry asked for a distraction.

"It will go on the whole day, but don't try to change the subject!" Hermione huffed at him.

"There is someone for sure, who is real hopping mad at you, Harry," said Ron. "We can't ignore this. Whoever it was, had a great plan and if it hadn't been for Ginny..." Ron shook his head at the other consequences.

"Flammilo Potion is lethal, Harry. It was used and still used by many notorious wizards to kill people... If it gets the time to react, it can burn all your insides," Hermione said with a shudder.

"I can tell you this - that it doesn't feel any great. I just experienced the insides of a Dragon's gut," Harry said jokingly, for which he received angry glares.

"I think the letter you received when you were ill has some connection with this incident," proposed Ginny, on a serious note.

"Well... who knows? I can't cower in a corner just because some twisted git is after my skin," Harry said angrily, feeling all revived, getting things out on the open.

-x-

*"Legilimens!"* Dumbledore shouted.

Harry, for the first time, was successfully able to block out Dumbledore's probing of his thoughts. He achieved this by imagining

that, all his thoughts were surrounded by a strong brick wall just like the Hogwarts Castle, and nobody could penetrate through it.

"Very good, Harry! This is your first total block," Dumbledore said smiling at him. "At least now I can rest a little bit easier. And if you continue like this for the next two classes, we will then start Legilimency," he said nodding towards Fawkes, who vanished with a flash of fire.

"I would advise you to be careful and vigilant. I see the brooding calmness around us very engaging, but I don't think that Voldemort is resting in peace. To the contrary, he has started to stir things up a bit," Dumbledore said, half absorbed in some thought.

"Professor, er... do you know what was stolen from the Department of Mysteries?" Harry asked anxiously.

"Some important documents have been stolen, very stealthily, and I'm afraid, that's just about all you can worm it out of me," Dumbledore said smiling knowingly at him.

He checked the time on his twelve handed clock. "Oh, how time flies. Run along now, I have to go to a meeting," he said, his eyes twinkling.

Sure, Harry could guess. "Another Order meeting, I reckon?"

Dumbledore nodded and walked Harry to the Entrance Hall.

"I think I can leave you here safely, but be careful," Dumbledore said, reminding him of the said killer on the prowl for him.

While walking absent mindedly to the main notice board in the Entrance Hall, he thought, who else could it be other than Draco Malfoy? After all, he was the one who vowed in an Alley to finish him off this term.

"Hogsmeade Weekend!" Harry almost jumped on the spot, all the thoughts of being murdered went away from his mind on a dead run. However, he regained his composure instantly. In his mind he saw the announcement winking at him expectantly on the notice board.

*I have to be prepared!* Harry thought, thinking about asking Ginny out for a date.

-X-

*Not too distant from Harry, a person smiled wickedly, seeing him miss a step in front of the notice board.*

*The Trap is set... Waiting its capture... Oh sweet raptured light... It'll end in a fortnight...*

-x.X.x-

## - CHAPTER 12 - Expecting the Unexpected (Part II) -

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"Harry, you are not concentrating!" Lupin said, folding his arms.

Harry was trying to make ropes come out of his wand, but they were so thin that they weren't even able to bind the Crup, he was supposed to trap.

"It's no use, I can't concentrate!" he said, giving his wand a last wave, producing a wooly thread, which arced towards the Crup's nose. The Crup, in response, started rubbing its nose with its little paws in an irritated fashion.

Lupin chuckled. "Okay, forget it, Harry. Anyways, the time is over. The advanced DA members would be arriving soon.

"So, what's eating you?" Lupin continued boyishly.

"I just can't make up my mind. It's like, there are so many decisions to make and sometimes I wonder why they have to be made by me..." Harry said twirling his wand in his hand, without meeting Lupin's eyes.

"Like?"

"What should I do about my blowing rage which keeps on getting on the edge of boiling point, what can I do about my friends who patrol around me as I'm the lost treasure of Black Pearl, what can I do about the people badgering me to 'be vigilant', what can I do about this whole hero pressure? ... Sometimes I feel I play too easy to get...

"And... I can't get Sirius off my mind, Lupin. I keep on seeing him... Am I going nuts with all these pressures over me?"

"I don't think so, Harry," Lupin answered, searching Harry's face for some sign. "It's just nerves I think. About being vigilant, well, you can't do anything about that, because your friends and well wishers are simply concerned about you. However, forget about the hero thing, will you?"

"About Sirius, I reckon you are ignoring the reality so clearly that you can't set up your mind right, and if for a second you stop the self-loathing sequel-"

Harry opened his mouth to protest but Lupin hurriedly went on, "And, yes, I admit that it is on the downfall. But still, you haven't gone over it. You see, Harry, he'll always be here... and best of all, you have his memories, which you can even feel and see. What more do you want? Or may be the reason of this tantrum is that, you haven't opened the diary after that incident?"

"I guess so," Harry said, shuffling his feet.

"I see." Lupin cleared his throat and went on, "If you are waiting for a guarantee, I would love to give mine. However, I think, this is not the only thing bothering you-" Lupin was interrupted by a knock at the door.

"DA members," Harry said, sighing.

"We'll continue later," Lupin said, patting Harry's shoulder.

Harry stood up and made his way to the center of the room. He had planned this lesson from quite before. He had already gone through the practical use of the Patronus Charm with Lupin. Obviously, they couldn't invite a real Dementor, so Harry became a babysitter for the whole class, while Lupin found him a boggart.

Harry planned to stand in boggart's range to let it change into a Dementor and then the students will practice with it and send their Patronuses at it.

"You know that this could be fatal," Lupin had warned him. However, Harry knew that for practice they all had to do this. The Dementors seemed to be the most powerful in Voldemort's army besides the deadly, dark spells used by the Death Eaters.

"If something goes wrong, Lupin, Prongs is there to save me," Harry said reminiscently, his eyes shining, while Lupin's features softened.

"Yes," he agreed, nostalgically.

The DA members filed in the Room of Requirement, while Harry mused on how this room had become a beacon of light for many of his purposes.

"How was the training, Harry?" asked Hermione.

"Oh... it was okay," said Harry, for which he received a furrowed look from Hermione, while Ron gave him a thumbs-up sign.

Looking at Ginny entering with Luna Lovegood, he felt a pang in his chest. The episode with Ginny hadn't progressed as Harry would have hoped. There were still many things unsaid and unresolved in between them.

When Lupin announced to the class what Harry intended to do, gibbering started at full speed.

"Are you mad, Harry? Bringing in a stupid boggart and doing *that* to yourself to make us practice!" Hermione bellowed, her arms flailing.

Lavender, Padma and Parvati Patil started shrieking like mad. "Oh c'mon, Harry... We... er... can't! Just can't! With... a r-rreal Dementor?"

"Oh no, no, no, NO!"

"Well, technically it will not be a *real* Dementor!" he said exasperatedly, but nobody listened, except Luna, who looked almost surreal.

Some of them were totally terrified. Harry could clearly see Neville screwing up his nose and thinking hard. Cho was looking edgy, while Michael Corner and Zacharias Smith looked downright angry.

"Okay, students, settle down!" Lupin's voice boomed over the babbling crowd and suddenly everybody went silent.

"I don't want to sound like Moody, but it's a reality that with the coming war, no one is safe. All of you saw what happened in Platform Nine and Three-Quarters, or do you all want your memories

refreshed?" Lupin surveyed the whole class while Harry folded his arms haughtily.

Most of them were looking at their shoes and Parvati, Lavender and Cho's faces looked totally drained of blood.

"People died that day without any apparent reason. If you get in trouble, you have to save your own skin, because nobody else will do that for you. Dementors are just a fraction of what lies ahead. There are many unexpected things in the future and you have to be prepared for it, as nothing can be foretold." Lupin was looking everybody up with a piercing gaze.

Harry could feel determination pour through Lupin and spread towards everybody, calming them and giving them vigor.

Harry noticed that Lupin was wearing a new robe; he was still a little pale and had more than his share of white hair. Nonetheless, he emanated an unwavering strength which seemed to infect everyone in the room.

"Now, does anybody have anything to add or any problems to discuss?" Lupin inquired and received murmurs of "no," and "not at all."

"Okay then. Let's start, Harry."

Lupin brought a small trunk, which was shaking slightly. One corner of the room was made totally devoid of furniture where the trunk was placed beside Harry.

"Now one by one, you will all face the Dementor-boggart. If it is getting over you, don't use *riddikulus*, just scam and give the person next to you a go at it. Don't get too close and maintain a certain distance, because if you don't, the Dementor will change into your own fear."

The class gave an involuntary shudder.

"Okay! So who wants to go first?" Lupin asked jovially, and for a while nobody raised their hand but then Michael Corner came forward fidgeting with his wand.

"Excellent!" Lupin exclaimed and indicated Harry to get in position. The whole class was looking at the proceedings transfixed.

Harry opened the trunk and readied himself for the coldness. A hulking figure of Dementor wrapped in black emerged from inside, drawing an audible, slow, rattling breath. Harry felt deja vu all over again as he had more than his share of Dementor chills but every time he faced it, it was new.

The whole room was swept by a coldness that engulfed not only him but the entire class, and they all felt the abrupt silence, even the bright lights of the room seemed to dim in its presence.

Harry steeled himself for his mother's cries, while Michael screwed up his face in concentration.

*"Expecto Patronum!"* Michael incanted.

A wisp of silvery gas shot out of Michael's wand, but was not enough to ward the Dementor off. Harry felt the chill seep through his body, as his eyes rolled up in his head. He went to a dark space, where nothing existed except a familiar voice: *"Come on, you can do better than that!"* Harry heard Sirius laugh, his voice echoing around him... but the laughter soon died, Harry could imagine Sirius's eyes widen in shock.

"SIRIUS!" Harry yelled, "NO, SIRIUS!"

Harry was kneeling down on the floor and Lupin was shaking him. "It's all right, Harry."

He felt so embarrassed. He realized that this wasn't such a good idea after all. However, he was too deep now and couldn't worm his way out of it.

Ron, Hermione and Ginny were standing beside Lupin, almost engulfing him from the prying eyes of the class.



Hermione stared at him accusingly while Lupin handed him a chocolate bar to eat.

"Let's try again?" Harry said meekly, not looking at Hermione, who huffed even more.

"Last time, Harry, and be ready yourself. Why didn't you call Prongs?" Lupin asked, looking at him hard.

*Why didn't I? Am I actually hoping to hear Sirius's voice again?* he thought sadly.

"Err... Let's have another go," he said without looking at Lupin.

Everything went well after that, whenever anyone faltered Harry would conjure his own Patronus, Prongs, and do away with the Dementor-boggart to hide again in the trunk. Hermione faltered at first but was able to conjure an otter to peck at the hulking figure. Ron produced a Saber-toothed Tiger, while Ginny produced a Leopard shaped Patronus.

However, everything went downhill when Cho came into the scene. She was last in line and looked very frightened. She uttered a very feeble, "*Expecto Patronum*," and wasn't able to produce even a wisp of smoke, except some light vapors.

While Prongs was cantering beside Harry, Cho was taken over by the Dementor and Lupin shouted, "*Riddikulus*," to finally finish it off.

Cho fainted in Harry's arms, as if woozy with exhaustion.

-x.X.x-

## - CHAPTER 13 - Marauders Incorporated -

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"If you don't like what you are seeing, look at something else," Harry said grumpily.

"My, my, cranky aren't we?" Ron smirked, for which he received a big cushion right on his face, thrown by Harry.

"It's no use, if you kept on sulking," Ron said reproachfully.

"Who's sulking?" Harry asked, making a face.

"I don't know, mate, but I see nobody else here who's reading a book upside down and sitting on the chintz imitating a brooding horklump!"

They were sitting in the common coom, which was deserted as it was late at night. They were pretending to do their homework; but to the contrary, both of them hadn't read or written a single word for almost half an hour.

Harry was still dazed over the DA class incident. The succession in which they had happened and the aftermath...

Cho limp in his arms, much to his bewilderment ... Many gasps and few giggles... Ginny's angry stare... Hermione's raised eyebrows, disappearing behind her bushy hair ... were the few things that he remembered vividly.

He remembered Lupin coming to his rescue. After finishing off the boggart, he had checked Cho's pulse and temperature and concluded that she had simply fainted. She was revived after soft splashes of water on her face.

When she at last came to, her eyes were out of focus and weary, and she was cringing from everyone in dismay. Lupin had conjured a stretcher and used *Wingardium Leviosa* to carry her to the Hospital Wing.

However, the reason he was so flabbergasted was his own behavior. He just kept on sitting there cradling Cho's head in his arms like it was some prized possession. He kept on staring at her like some

love-sick puppy, for crying out loud! He didn't know what came over him. Today there was no sun to reflect its rays on her black shiny hair! ... *Damn it!* He was still thinking about her...

*What's the matter with me!* He angrily pounded the arm of his sofa, due to which a chip of paint fell off to the carpet and Ron gave him another sympathetic smile.

"Ron, I'm going to the Room of Requirement. Open the portrait hole for me, will you?" he said heading towards his room

"I don't think it's a good idea, mate. I reckon you should cool off and use the diary when you are in a good mood."

"I can't stand this, Ron! Those memories have to cool me off," he said hopefully.

"Okay, if you say so." Ron shrugged.

As Ron was tidying up his things, Harry came down with his invisibility cloak, Marauder's Map and the diary-all ready for another blast of the past.

"Are you going to spend the night there again? Because Filch is always on the prowl and now he knows that more than half the students know about the room. So better be careful," said Ron, warningly.

"No, I may not get lucky again. But, you know, I can't use the diary over here. Don't worry, I'll lock the door and be back in an hour," said Harry, draping the cloak around him.

"Okay, and be careful," said Ron.

"Yes, mother!" said Harry, from somewhere, as he had his cloak on.

Ron rolled his eyes in indignation for which he got a poke in his ribs.

"Owww," Ron faked.

"Bye, bye, chum," Harry said cheerfully. His mood was lightening by the mere thought of seeing some form of Sirius again-and with his own father, he added happily.

-X-

If it wasn't for the sound of muffled giggling, Harry would have continued with his journey towards his destination, but the snickering sound was growing louder by the minute.

So, he risked a look and took out the map. *"I solemnly swear I'm up to no good."*

There was no one in the room in question. *How could that be possible?*

His curious side got the better of him and he peeked inside the room, which was one of the many supply rooms of Hogwarts-that's why, mostly empty.

Tonight, the room was full with gnomes and it seemed like they were having a brash party. Harry smiled to himself; it must be the work of some new mischief-maker clambering for the top position, after Weasley brothers soared out of Hogwarts.

He was about to leave the corridor, when he saw Mrs. Norris coming towards the room in the map.

"Uh oh." He hid behind the nearest tapestry and saw Mrs. Norris make her way towards the gnome filled room.

To top it all off, Peeves came cackling manically and kicked Mrs. Norris through the door and shut her in, who in turn, was so busy in baring her teeth and hissing at Peeves that she didn't realize what Peeve's original intention was.

"Too late," Harry chortled.

Harry muffled his laughter by jabbing his hand in his mouth. He had wanted to do the same to Mrs. Norris for ages.

His attention was diverted to another nearing dot in the map, of Colin Creevey. Harry was not the only one doing the laughing; Colin was doing the same, standing not far from the room hidden by a man-sized vase. He was peering through the vase's neck and shaking with suppressed laughter.

Harry was amazed out of his wits. Colin: the blubbering boy, playing tricks on Filch's sweet and lovely cat!

*This is unbelievable! What's Hogwarts coming to?*

Harry didn't waste much of his time hanging around; he continued his expedition.

*"Peace and Quiet,"* Harry muttered under his breath as he continued pacing the length of the corridor beside the Room of Requirement, when he instinctively ducked behind the nearest vase because Seamus Finnegan was rushing out of the room with Padma Patil!

*Oh, what's Hogwarts coming to?* he mused, shaking his head and smiling.

-x-

The room was the same as it was in his previous late-night visit.

Too much familiarity poured through this room.

*... Be well, Harry, and take care of yourself ...* Oh how he remembered!

Suddenly, he didn't want to open the diary at all. His heart was too heavy to go through that again. But at least now he understood why Sirius did all that, in the first place. Because if he hadn't, Harry wouldn't have accepted his death, ever... He would have visited Sirius every night...

But then again, there were still some hallucinations to think about... *or were they?*

He put his cloak and the map on the desk and propped on his favorite plush chaise longue and started leafing through the diary after saying the password. At least he had worked out the fact that unless he tapped the diary with his wand, he wouldn't be transported to the memories.

*Let's start from the beginning.*

The first entry was made on **27th December 1970.**

*At last I received something interesting for my birthday. It's nothing like what mother gave sonny boy in his, but I don't care! Andromeda is my favorite cousin and no one can do anything about it. Even if mother keeps on sniffing as if there's something smelly just beneath her nostrils whenever she's around.*

*I like Andromeda! It's not her fault that she didn't get sorted into Slytherin.*

*I actually think it was wicked that she got sorted into another house. Someone should balance out our family and an intelligent Ravenclaw might just do the trick.*

*This diary is pretty good. At least I can write my thoughts without worrying about anyone reading them.*

*I don't know what the matter with me is, but somehow I feel I don't belong here. I hope I turn eleven soon, because the time spent here, under the roof of my father is making me more edgy everyday. I want to fly away some place, where no orders are barked, where people don't hate each other.*

*I hope I get sorted to Ravenclaw too, so that I can at least be with my favorite cousin. I hope, can't I?*

**18th February 1971,**

*I can't stand my mother! She's always shrieking about Pureblood hogwash! Where are you stupid owl from Hogwarts! I'll be eleven soon... when are you going to come and rescue me from this stuffed place? Come on already!*

**27th July 1971,**

*At last! The stupid owl came with the letter. I danced throughout the house, gloating, sonny boy: Regulus, on. I can't say I was satisfied to see him burst into tears but then again, that stupid elf was distracting me by bowing all over me. Why do I get the feeling sometimes that Kreacher doesn't like me? Is it because I play pranks on him? I just greased the kitchen floor in anger one day, but that stupid git went blabbering to the High and Mighty and I was shut for three days in my room.*

*I'll not be cooped up here forever! I'm going to be free!*

**1st September 1971,**

On this page, there was a heading written with red ink: ***"The Beginning..."***

Harry tapped the diary and readied himself for whatever in store for him. Like before, the walls of the Room of Requirements dissolved with a swirl of grey; he found himself standing in a black and white Platform Nine and Three-Quarters.

Harry could see young Sirius looking tentatively at everybody as he made his way towards the Hogwarts Express. He was accompanied by a tall wizard with jet-black hair, just like his own. However, Sirius had an open and friendly face whereas the Senior Black's eyes were cold as ice and his lips were pursed in anger, which made the age-lines around his mouth and forehead more prominent.

Sirius's father indicated towards a man-who, no doubt, was their chauffeur-to carry his trunk to the carriage.

"Don't play your kiddy games in school, Sirius. You have to uphold your family's honor; the noble heritage of Blacks. I hope you will not disappoint me, and especially your mother," Sirius's father uttered sternly.

"Yes, Father," Sirius managed, bowing his head.

"Send us an owl if you want anything or have forgotten anything. And yes... Be good Sirius," these last words were uttered like a warning.

Sirius mustered another, "Yes, *Father!*"

Sirius sulked towards the compartment his things were put into. Harry noticed that he owned an eagle owl with dark brown and black streaked feathers.

The moment he entered the compartment, he tugged off his muffler and slammed it over his trunk in anger. He sidled beside the window, when all the traces of rage dissipated from his face as he became lost in a scene outside.

From the window, Harry could see a boy of his age with very untidy black hair talking excitedly to a wizard and a witch. The wizard had black untidy hair, identical to his son's and the witch had an oval and kind face with prominent hazel eyes. *Must be his parents*, Harry heard Sirius say, but he hadn't moved his lips.

*I can hear his thoughts!* Harry jumped on the spot excitedly and stared fixatedly at his grandparents and father.

James was skipping on his feet to catch a toy broomstick from his father, who was dangling it out of his reach playfully.

"C'mon, Dad! Give it to me," said James, continuing his one-foot dance.

Harry could feel the expression of longing in Sirius's eyes as he stared through the window towards Harry's grandfather. When suddenly the train gave a lurch and Sirius shook in his seat, while Harry saw James being nudged towards the train by his father, and his mother, whispering last moment advice in his ears.

Sirius sighed forlornly, but was secretly delighted when James appeared at his compartment door. He came lumbering through the door towing his trunk and clutching the toy-broomstick under one arm. Sirius gave him a hand with the trunk and settled down.

"Hi, I'm James, James Potter."



"Hullo, I'm Sirius Black."

"Black? Hmm... Are you the great-great-Grandson of the Headmaster of Hogwarts named... erm... Pine Niggles?"

Sirius snorted with laughter. "No. It's Phineas Nigellus Black though, but Pine Niggles suits him right."

James smiled sheepishly, embarrassed by his mistake. However, an instant likeness struck between them, from that moment on.

"How do you know about my great-great-Grandfather?" Sirius enquired.

"My father is interested in history. He works at the Ministry, in the Department of International Magical Co-operation. So, most of the time, he keeps on talking about the books that he had finished and all that stuff,"-James waved his hand as if to show his indifference-"the name Black just stuck in my mind, that's all."

Harry thought James was trying to hide something-he must have remembered some tale of Sirius's arrogant Grandfather; who was the least popular Headmaster of Hogwarts. Harry was musing, when was jolted forwards as everything around him started blurring and he could barely make out the window of the compartment, in which trees were coming and going in a breakneck speed.

And, as suddenly as it all had started as abruptly everything halted. Harry lost his balance and lunged forward, right towards Sirius' trunk. There was no impact, as he slid through it without feeling anything and instinctively flinched away from it.

Sirius and James were on the floor laughing their heads off. James was thumping the floor and Sirius was clutching his stomach and between gasps of breaths, James was saying, "... And her hair turned green and she didn't even know ... she thought I gave her some makeover!"

"... So when did Nimbles come in the scene?" Sirius asked between his laugh.

"... oh yeah, the toad! ... He directly jumped on her head... with one big leap!"

"... Nimbles must have thought it was some shrub!"

"... Oh how she screamed her head off!"

They were laughing like maniacs, when the train started to slow down.

"Aaargh... we'll become late!" Sirius jumped and started getting into his robes and James followed suit.

"We are here!" James announced, and jumped on the spot, much to the amazement of Harry, as the train stopped.

They hurried out of the compartment and joined the line of the first-years, which was led by a hulking figure, Harry was quite familiar with.

"C'mon, firs'-year! Firs'-year! Get a move on!"

A much younger looking Hagrid was herding the first-years towards the lake. There wasn't any drastic difference in this Hagrid and the one he knew but his moleskin coat in this memory looked brand new.

Harry's attention diverted when he saw Sirius bump into a short, mousy looking boy.

"Oh sorry!" said Sirius. But the boy looked utterly terrified, who gave a small squeak and started with the path again after a slight glance towards James.

Harry could guess from miles that, it was the Marauder's traitor: Peter Pettigrew.

"What's the matter with him?" Sirius asked incredulously.

"Dunno... lost his gobstones, more like!" James guffawed.

"Uh-huh... Do you know how the sorting takes place?" asked James, changing the topic.

"I dunno... I have heard terrible stories about it. I heard you've got to tame a dragon or something," Sirius said with a shudder.

"Oh yeah? I heard you have to wrestle a troll," James said, going a little pale.

Someone snorted just behind them. James turned to see who it was along with Sirius.

Just behind a girl, a boy with a hooked nose and greasy black hair was smirking at nothing in particular.

Harry gasped to see a young Snape striding beside a blond girl with supreme air about her.

"Look at that slime ball; who does he think he is!" James said in disgust.

Sirius was also scrunching up his nose at Snape, but didn't say anything and bumped into Peter again, as the line had suddenly stopped moving.

Harry could hear students oohing and aahing, after seeing the picturesque scene of Hogwarts' many towers reflected on the lake.

"Don't tell me we have to go by the lake!" the blond girl behind them shrieked. In response, Peter gave a bigger squeak, to which James and Sirius only chuckled.

The lake journey was knuckle-whitening. Everyone had to hang on to the railing of the boat as their life depended on it, because the boats kept on rocking dangerously, throughout the journey due to the wind-storm.

When they at last reached the other side, the blond girl and Peter both got violently sick and many of them moved to give them some space.

"*Ugh!*" was the majority's response.

They were all welcomed in the Entrance Hall by a tall black-haired witch, who was standing on the brink of the stairs leading towards the Great Hall, interlacing her fingers on a rolled parchment.

Harry almost felt transported back to his own first-year when McGonagall had awaited for them, not unlike she was doing in this memory. The only difference was that her silver strands were very few, to be noticeable.

"Firs'-year', Professor," said Hagrid, ushering the student towards her.

"Thank you, Hagrid," said Professor McGonagall.

"Welcome to Hogwarts, students. The sorting ceremony will commence shortly, in which, all of you would be sorted into four houses according to the qualities you possess. The houses are Gryffindor, Ravenclaw, Hufflepuff and Slytherin. There are separate dormitories for every house and your houses will be your family while you are away from your original ones. Your triumphs will earn your House points, whereas any rule-breaking will lose them. I can guarantee that you will have a pleasant time here at Hogwarts, the mere walls of which emanate a thousand year old legacy from the time of your forefathers."

"Wait here quietly, the ceremony is about to start in a moment," said McGonagall, and made for the Great Hall.

As they were waiting to be called in, they were joined by a pale looking boy, who looked rather peaky. He shyly melted into the crowd without even a trace.

*'What's with that boy?'* Sirius thought, furrowing his eyebrows.

*"Remus!"* Harry said out loud, and instinctively jabbed his hand in his mouth, but then remembered that he couldn't be heard.

"Hey, where do you want to get sorted?" asked James, and without further ado announced, *"I want to be in Gryffindor!"*

Sirius's heart sank as a guarded expression came over his face. *'Gryffindor? My parents hate Gryffindor! They all were sorted into*

*Slytherin. Obviously except Andromeda and some of my long lost cousins... what were their names? Weasley... oh yes! Does this mean that I will not be friends with James? ... I hope he gets into Slytherin...'*

Professor McGonagall appeared again. "Follow me, students."

They all stared in amazement at the thousands of candles floating in midair and the glittering decorations around the walls sporting the Hogwarts crest and House banners. It was nothing new for Harry, as he had walked through these same paths, too many times to even count.

Sirius sighed in relief when he found out that there was no dragon to tame or a troll to wrestle. They only had to wear the moldy looking Sorting Hat to get sorted into Houses.

As the Sorting Hat was singing a new song, welcoming the new students to Hogwarts, Harry was busy distinguishing familiar faces from the unfamiliar ones. Dumbledore as usual was sitting in the middle of the Head-table with Professor Flitwick and Sinistra on his either sides.

"Black, Sirius."

Both Harry and Sirius were jolted back towards Professor McGonagall's voice as she announced the name. Sirius, with bated breath, made towards the Sorting Hat, and Harry following suit went so close to him that if he would have been physically present, he would have knocked Sirius down the stool.

"Hmm... Quite an intelligent mind... and very resourceful-indeed! Too bold to fit in your shoes, eh? So, where to fit you..."

"Please Gryffindor... or... or even Ravenclaw,"

"Oho! So you don't want to go to Slytherin, eh?" the Sorting Hat asked.

"Please! Anything except Slytherin."

"Okay then, GRYFFINDOR!"

Gryffindor students cheered on a very shocked Sirius, as James showed him a thumbs-up sign, while he was making his way towards the Gryffindor table. On his way Sirius waved to Andromeda at the Ravenclaw table, who seemed as if she was having a heart attack. Sirius grinned at her and received a grin back.

Some of the students that Harry noticed being sorted while gazing around the Hall were:

"Bones, Edgar."

"RAVENCLAW!"

"Dearborn, Caradoc."

"GRYFFINDOR!"

Evans, Lily.

"GRYFFINDOR!"

"Lupin, Remus."

"GRYFFINDOR!"

"Meadowes, Dorcas."

"GRYFFINDOR!"

"Pettigrew, Peter." It took about five minutes for the Sorting Hat to decide where Peter belonged.

"GRYFFINDOR!"

"Podmore, Sturgis."

"HUFFLEPUFF!"

"Potter, James,"

"GRYFFINDOR!" Sirius clapped like a maniac as James made his way towards the table.

"Snape, Severus."

"SLYTHERIN!"

"Boooo," James and Sirius playfully hollered.

"Williams, Alice,"

"GRYFFINDOR!"

With 'Gryffindor' still wringing in his ears, he lurched forward again as the scene around him started swirling in grey.

This time when the swirling stopped, Sirius and James were striding towards the Hogwarts Lake on a particularly bright morning. Sirius was taking everything in, including the protruding tentacles of the Giant Squid on the lake, while James was busy ruffling his hair.

Some forth-year girls were also strolling towards the same direction and James seeing an opportunity gave them a very charming and adorable smile. The girls in turn, giggled and waved past them saying, "Did you see that cute kid?"

Harry could do nothing except to roll his eyes and shake his head in dismay.

They were basking in the sun beside the lake when Sirius noticed bright sparks coming off from beyond a dense shrub.

"I think something's up over there," said Sirius, pointing towards the commotion.

"Let's have a look," said James, looking all intrigued.

They slowly made their way towards the thicket. When they neared the shrubbery, they could easily hear laughing and jeering from beyond it.

"Ooooooh, scared are you now?" said a menacing voice.

"Ickly little firstee! Now do you understand who the boss is? Huh?"

James and Sirius exchanged quizzical looks as they crept closer and closer... Some maniacal laughs were exchanged from which they could guess that more than three people were there, except the silent victim.

"Should have stayed where you were; this is what you get when you come snooping around."

"But I wasn't snooping around!" a shrill voice whined. "I just lost my way towards the Green House!"

"Lost my way towards the Green House because I want to be the next geek of the school!" a voice mimicked the shrill voice.

"This will teach you a lesson to have respect for your seniors!"

*"Incendio!"*

They could hear the boy shrieking in pain.

"Stop it!" Sirius came out from the cover of the thicket, whereas James uttered a spell instinctively, which shot a spray of water from the tip of his wand towards the twitching body of Peter Pettigrew.

"Well, well, well, what we have here? Little knight in a Black shiny armor!" roared a stocky boy with broad shoulders, while his three friends snickered appreciatively.

One of them was blond and could be none other than Lucius Malfoy and from the heavy built of the rest of the two, Harry could guess that they were none other than Senior Crabbe and Goyle. *But who was this forth person?*

"Who are you?" Sirius asked with furrowed eyebrows.

"Oh yes. Introductions! You don't know me, but I sure do know you," said the stocky boy sneering and showing his perfect rows of teeth-too perfect, to be truthful.



"Rodolphus Lestrangle at your service, lil poo Sirroo! And meet my friends: Lucius Malfoy, Jeremy Crabbe and Jacob Goyle."

As comprehension dawned on Harry, Sirius roared back, "I'm no lil poo, you numb-nut! Clear off before I call some professor!" Sirius was all red, from embarrassment or anger, Harry couldn't tell.

"Oh scared now, are you Sirroo?" said a very silky voice of Lucius Malfoy. "Scared that we'll beat the daylight out of you... hmm?"

"Clear off, boys, before something happens that you'll regret later," said a very calm voice of James, who had his wand ready.

"And who *are* you? Messy face of the year?" Lucius asked, sneering at James.

"Ooooooh, you don't know me but I sure *do* know you," James said mimicking Rodolphus. "You are the snot-faced toe rag of the year, Lushy poo!"

Lucius roared in anger, while Rodolphus restrained him. "You are two and we are four, even a Flobberworm could guess that you are no match for us!"

"Don't be so sure, Roddy!" said Sirius, his wand ready to duel.

"Oh yeah?"

Harry instinctively got out of the way, as six different spells shot between the group as Crabbe and Rodolphus went straight for Sirius, whereas Lucius and Goyle jumped at James.

*"Stupefy!"*

*"Expelliarmus!"*

*"Diffindo!"*

*"Petrificus Totalus!"*

*"Protego!"*

*"Furnunculus!"*

As the confusion of the spells subsided, Harry could see James on the ground, while Goyle pounded at him, but soon got hit by, *"Petrificus Totalus!"*

Lucius staggered towards James and kicked him on his shins. A painful howl escaped James' throat as he rolled over to his right side and was instantly hit by Malfoy again with a log of wood with such force that Harry heard his bone crack. James howled again as Malfoy joined Crabbe and Rodolphus who were ambushing Sirius.

Sirius's nose and lips were bleeding and he was moving away from the three hulking figures edging towards him, but to no avail, as Crabbe stepped on Sirius's wand and Sirius was left looking at its two halves longingly.

"Not so brave now, are you, lil poo Sirroo?" Rodolphus said mockingly.

Sirius readied his arms and legs to protest against the assault of the gang of the three.

*"Cruci-"*

But the rest of the words died in Rodolphus's mouth as he got hit by a Freezing Charm, shot by none other than Remus Lupin.

"YEAH!" Harry jumped with joy with the timely arrival of Moony.

*"Locomotor Mortis!"* Crabbe became glued to the spot, his arms flailing, wildly about.

As Lucius advanced towards Remus, Peter with some pent up energy from nowhere, hit him with, *"Rictusempera!"*

Malfoy blocked it and angrily made a slashing movement towards Peter. Purple fumes discharges from his wand while passing straight through Peter's chest. Peter crumpled to the ground without uttering a single sound.

"*You little-*" Sirius swore, swiftly picking up Peter's wand and stunning Malfoy successfully.

"Are you all right?" Remus inquired of James.

"I'm all right, but look at Peter, I dunno what happened to him," James said grimacing.

Sirius bent down and checked Peter's pulse, while Lupin hovered in the background awkwardly, looking concerned.

"He's still breathing!" Sirius announced happily.

"But you don't look so good, mate," said Sirius, looking skeptically towards James.

"Oh stop being my Mum and get a move on! We have to get to the Hospital and fast!" James said wincing.

"Oh yeah!" Sirius and Lupin said together.

A look was exchanged between Sirius, James and Remus, as if they had just realized the seriousness and absurdity of the situation at the same time. A sudden feeling of compassion linked them together in that moment as if they could read each other's mind and knew each other from ages.

Lupin heaved Peter on his shoulders like a duffel bag, while Sirius advanced on James.

"Hey! I can walk," James protested and tried to stand up, only to keel over on the ground in pain again.

"Yeah, riiight!" Sirius said rolling his eyes and heaved James on his shoulders and started hurrying towards the Hospital wing beside Remus.

Harry ran along but halfway through the school grounds, Room of Requirement came coloring back his world with yellowing lights sprayed with white little spots. The confinement of the room seemed

a little too unreal for Harry as he crashed down on his favorite couch, out of breath.

After a while, he smoothed the diary's pages unnecessarily and said out loud, "So, this is how it all started?"

He was smiling to himself.

-x.X.x-

## **- CHAPTER 14 - Trapped at Shrieking Shack -**

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After the Cho episode, Harry hadn't been able to see eye to eye with Ginny, as he himself didn't know what to make of it all. He had originally planned to bring Ginny along in their first Hogsmeade visit. But clearly, it wasn't to be, because it was not only Harry who was feeling skeptical but Ginny too was showing signs of uncertainty.

As the days drew by, tension between them grew to such a pitch that on Friday:

"Harry, what are you doing?" Hermione inquired sharply.

"What?" Harry asked bewildered.

"You are making your lapel eat!" Hermione said incredulously, while Ron chuckled.

Harry was so immersed in his thoughts that he couldn't even build the sense of what he was eating or what he was making his lapel eat, for that matter.

Like a breeze, his cause of discomfort came sauntering in the Great Hall with Marietta Edgecombe in tow. Hermione also stared after Cho intently, as if she was trying to judge what she was actually up to.

Ginny suddenly left her seat and went towards Dean Thomas. Harry suspiciously watched her as she talked to him. She asked Dean something and got a grinning response along a nod.

She returned to her seat and with a clatter, Ginny scooped up her books ceremoniously and stalked off towards the Library.

"If I can guess, Ginny has just asked out Dean," said Hermione, looking skeptically at Harry, while he looked stricken.

Ron suddenly became drawn and started fidgeting with the Daily Prophet, when he abruptly sat upright and yelled, "Listen to this! Strange weather reports from Muggle news."

The three of them huddled together to read it.

-X-

## **Strange weather conditions or Thoroughfare of Doom?**

-X-

### ***From Our International Correspondent***

*From a time unknown, Muggles have denied the existence of another world, a world which is completely different from theirs, a world they don't want to know about. But now it is becoming apparent more than ever that another exists not too far from them.*

*This is not the first time that Muggles have noticed some wizard or witch doing magic, as many of them have dwelled on "Witch hunts" but never have been successful except when the wizard or witch was willing.*

*In September this year, they saw a full fledged group Disapparating in front of their eyes, dubbing them "The Grim Reapers"-we know as the Death Eaters. But no such sightings have been received after the Platform Nine and Three Quarters' incident.*

*However, when we start to go on with our life again, we are nonplussed by the strange vibrations in the air. A sudden hush in the winds and a strange calmness... a tell-tale sign of an upcoming storm...*

*Muggles dub it as the revolution of the planet earth and changing weather conditions. Like their statement about the state of "the Colosseum" in Italy, Rome, which according to them has deteriorated because of bad weather and vandalism, when actually its hinges were loosened in 1944 during the destruction of Grindelwald.*

*The wizarding community has to be vigilant and watchful because many of us are already reading the signs; the centaurs are silent more than usual and all the magical creatures are taking a stance.*

-X-X-

"What a strange article!" Hermione exclaimed.

"What's the Colosseum?" asked Ron looking intrigued.

"It's a historical place at Italy, Ron. It was the center for thousands of hand-to-hand combats between gladiators, contests between men and animals, and many larger combats, including mock naval engagements. What Muggles don't know is that before the establishment of the Ministry of Magic in every country, wizards and witches from all over the world used to congregate there."

Harry and Ron gaped at Hermione on her vast knowledge, while she smiled matter-of-factly.

"You know the Muggle history too?" Harry was amazed.

"Well, as both of you haven't read *Hogwarts: A History*, don't complain, because I checked the reference and it is said that in one of those meetings, our Heads of the Houses met and decided to create Hogwarts," finished Hermione, in her know-it-all tone, leaving the boys wondering even more.

-X-

"That wasn't very nice of you," a dreamy voice startled Harry. He was sitting under a tree-a thing he has been doing too much lately-waiting for Ron and Hermione to show up, until Luna Lovegood came into view.

"What?" said Harry reproachfully, knowing too well, what she was talking about.

Luna just stared fixatedly at him with her bulging eyes, making him uneasy and trotted off towards Hogsmeade without saying anything further.

"What took you so long?" Harry bellowed, seeing Ron and Hermione.

"We were checking some references for our essay of History," said Ron uneasily, while Harry checked them out suspiciously. Hermione's eyes were downcast.

"When did you start studying?" asked Harry unbelievably.

Ron started stuttering when Harry said with a sigh, "Oh forget it. Let's go."

They made their way towards Honeydukes and spent almost half of their money there. Ron goggled at all the sweets and purchased everything that came in his view. They didn't visit Zonko's because they had already gotten their special supplies from '*Weasley's Wizard Wheezes*.'

At the Three Broomsticks they purchased butterbeer and seated themselves at a corner table.

Only in a manner of minutes, Cho passed them by with Marietta.

Harry groaned and Ron rolled his eyes.

"What is it with her?" Harry almost screamed and was hushed by Hermione. Some third-years sitting beside their table were peeking at them suspiciously.

"She wants you to see that she's available," said Hermione, arching her brows.

"You know, Harry... I think there is something dodgy about this whole... Cho thing," said Ron with a look of concentration.

"I don't know myself, mate. But I know this, that she's no Veela," said Harry, wishing that Cho was a Veela, at least then, his behavior would have been explainable.

In came Ginny and Dean, and Harry had just had it.

"Let's get out of this place, I'm feeling suffocated here," Harry said edgily.

Hermione followed him, but Ron found time to give Ginny a disapproving look before going out, which she pretended not to notice.

"Let's head towards the Shrieking Shack," Harry said nostalgically.

"I don't think it's a good idea, Harry," Hermione said apprehensively.



"Oh c'mon, Hermione, lighten up and be adventurous. We *know* what the Shrieking Shack actually is. There's no ghost in there if *that* helps," Ron said teasingly.

Hermione huffed up and silently followed Harry and Ron in climbing the slope leading to the Shack. She was gasping for breath when they finally reached their destination. Harry was just extending his hand to open the door, when a cold menacing voice called from behind.

"I knew it. I *would* find you here."

Harry spun around and saw the smirking face of Draco Malfoy along with his body guards. Strangely, Harry was not at all surprised at the appearance of his nemesis along his clan.

"What are you doing here, Malfoy?" Harry spat.

"I can ask you the same question, Potter. What are *you* doing here?" Draco asked, smirking at him.

"None of your business!" Harry said angrily.

"Came here to mope for your worthless godfather, did you?"

"You little-" Harry swore loudly.

"Temper, temper, Potter. If you go on like this, you'll soon burn out," Draco said smiling broadly, as if he was enjoying a particularly favorite sport, while his two cronies guffawed.

"Very devious of you to follow us here," said Hermione, folding her arms.

"Oh shut up, Mudblood! You don't know when to open your mouth," said Draco, sneering at her like she was some insect, crawling at his feet.

Ron made a wild move towards Malfoy but Hermione and Harry stopped him by grabbing his robe.

"*Wait for the right time*," Harry whispered in his ear warningly.

"Scared, are you now, Weasel King?"

"Even my stupid rat, who was actually one of your dad's old pals, was not scared of you all. Why will I ever be afraid of you! You bloody little pipsqueak," Ron said hotly.

Malfoy looked livid in fury as he advanced towards them. "I'll show you, you-" Draco swore crudely as he shot red sparks from his wand.

Before they could do anything, the air filled with a round of cracks, telling them about the unwanted visitors.

Hermione gasped as they saw that they were barricaded by almost ten Death Eaters, who were advancing towards them forebodingly.

"Uh-oh! We're trapped!" said Ron, taking out his wand.

"Thanks for informing us," Harry said sarcastically.

"It was your idea to come here in the first place," Ron answered derisively.

"This is no time to squabble!" Hermione quipped in, warningly.

"What are you all whispering about? Looking for a way to run off?" Draco sneered at them, in his usual pucker.

Before Harry could reward Draco with some carefully chosen words regarding his mindset, he was interrupted by the silky voice of Lucius Malfoy, who was coming towards where they were standing.

"So, we meet again, Potter. Did you think your worthless Ministry would be able to detain us in Azkaban for long? When all the Dementors have joined our alliance and the Dark Lord is growing stronger everyday?"

Harry was too absorbed in finding a way out of this situation to reply to Malfoy. He was back in Sirius's memory, where Peter was tortured by almost the same people here. He could guarantee that Rodolphus

was one of the banding Death Eaters. *But, was Wormtail with them now?* Harry wondered.

He motioned to his friends to stay alert, as he himself tightened his grip on his wand.

"You are three and we are thirteen, even a Flobberworm could guess that you are no match for us!" Rodolphus Lestrange announced, flexing his right hand.

Harry could feel the déjà vu in the air, as he replied, "You always were good at counting but," Harry continued like his father had years ago, "don't be so sure, Roddy!"

Five figures stiffened in the Death Eater circle. Draco looked bewildered, while Hermione and Ron gaped at him.

"*What was all that about?*" Ron whispered.

"Later. Here's the plan, Hermione; Ron and I will run in opposite directions to divide the group and you will go in the Shrieking Shack and towards Hogwarts from the secret passage to get help. All right?"

"But- but," Hermione protested but was silenced by Harry. "Got any other bright ideas?" When there was no reply, he continued, "On the count of three."

"*One.*"

"Come on, Potter!" Draco yelled at him.

"*Two ... Three!*"

Ron and Harry bolted in opposite directions, shielded by the overgrown garden of the Shrieking Shack. As predicted, the Death Eaters divided to follow them after short commands barked by Rodolphus, while the Draco clan went after Hermione.

Harry slid down the slope and fell facedown near a black cloak. His glasses were covered with so much dirt that he couldn't make out, who it was. That person ran in another direction and abruptly, every

sound around him was muted as he heard a slow harrumphed rattling, the sound of a very familiar intake of breath.

Without even missing a beat, he yelled, "*Expecto Patronum!*" while thinking about squishing Draco Malfoy's face in the same dirt that he was lying in.

And Prongs was unleashed.

Before he could even clean his glasses to see the retreating figure of the Dementor, a hurricanic wind started to swirl near him, which cleaned his glasses automatically.

Harry was facing a gaping hole of nothingness, not too distant from him and before he could do anything, he was floating in the air, drawn towards it.

"Harry, NO!" someone screamed.

*"Ferula!"*

Harry was bound by bandages and was dragged in the opposite direction. Ginny and Dean were pulling the bindings with all their might.

Professor McGonagall, Lupin and Hagrid came running towards them the same instant. To his astonishment, Lupin did the same complex wand movement and chanting, closing the portal, just like Dumbledore had done on Platform Nine and Three-Quarters.

"That was quick thinking, Miss Weasley," Professor McGonagall said, as Hagrid was dusting Harry with big swipes.

"Feelin' all right, Harry?"

"Ron! Death Eaters must be still following him. Did Hermione get to you?" Harry blurted in a hurry.

"Let's not waste time here on storytelling, shall we?" Lupin said urgently and headed for the Shrieking Shack, while all of them followed suit, with Hagrid in the lead with his long strides.

"I dunno what happened to the ones who were following me," Harry panted between breaths, keeping pace with Lupin.

"Must have scrambled as they always do."

They stopped in front of the Shack, because Hermione and Luna were coming towards them supporting Ron in between; who was coughing blood.

Professor McGonagall gasped in alarm and conjured a stretcher for him.

"Where is Draco?" Harry asked Hermione.

"Should be in there." She motioned towards the Shack. "I tied him along Crabbe and Goyle and went after Ron... I just knew that if I'd run to school, something bad would have happened," she said, her bloody lips quivering, not meeting Harry's eyes.

Ron looked pale and pinched, as if somebody had drained his body of blood.

"Lupin, you go with Harry to check on Malfoy and we'll go to the Hospital Wing," Professor McGonagall directed, while conjuring a stretcher for Ron.

-X-

Harry entered the Shack with Lupin, who sighed reminiscently and Harry noticed his eyes gleam in the half darkness.

"They escaped!" Lupin said disappointedly, picking the pieces of cut rope from the floor. "And there's no evidence of their being connected to the Death Eaters except your, Ron's and Hermione's word, which could easily be manipulated."

Harry kicked at a moldy cushion lying on the floor, which careened off to the opposite corner of the room, leaving dust particles behind.

"So, now they know about the Whomping Willow's secret passage," Harry said regretfully.

"Yeah, well, I guess, they knew it all along. Peter must have told them about it," Lupin said dejectedly.

Harry didn't want to intrude but it looked like Lupin wanted to talk.

"For years, we all were the best mates. The Marauders, the epitome of friendship... Students and professors alike used to give our example whenever there was any discussion about friendship... And now, look at what is left of it: these dust covered floors, broken furniture, scratched walls... broken promises and loneliness," Lupin finished hoarsely, pounding on the nearest table with his fist, which groaned to the ground in termite eaten dust.

Harry had never thought this way, how Lupin felt after the death of his friends and about the friend who betrayed all of them.

"It all started with Peter, you know. I stumbled upon him being bullied and Sirius and James trying to save his neck... what a friendship he has proven," Lupin sighed and shook his head sadly.

"A friend whose life you saved by carrying him to the hospital," Harry said in a distant voice.

Lupin's head snapped in attention. "How did you? ... Oh ... Sirius's diary. I should have known. So, you figured it out and saw it happen?" Lupin asked his eyes gleaming.

"Yes, I did. You carried Peter and Sirius carried James and after that there was no looking back, right?" Harry asked.

"Yes, that was the start..." Lupin's voice became distant, like he was trying to remember something as well.

"I had a question that I wanted to ask you," said Harry.

"What?"

"Why you weren't on the Hogwarts Express, or may be you were..."- Harry furrowed his brow in concentration-"but I remember you joining the first-years in the Entrance Hall. If I remember correctly, you were not in the line of the first-years before."

"Yes, I wasn't in the line. I came by Knight Bus because it was on twenty-eighth August that I found out that I was finally accepted at Hogwarts. You know, Harry, before Dumbledore, nothing unusual was accepted in the wizarding world. The year I turned eleven, I didn't receive a Hogwarts letter," he said, smiling bitterly.

"But why?" Harry asked bewildered.

"Because I am a werewolf and no nice kid would play with me and accept me, because of what I am... I had lost hope of ever being educated, but then Dumbledore became the Headmaster and things changed. So, I was actually twelve when I joined Hogwarts, and now when I look back, I'm really glad that things worked out the way it did, because, if I had been accepted at eleven, I would've never had the privilege of being a Marauder."

Lupin turned away and started going through the Shack, silently followed by Harry, room after room, taking in the moldy walls of the Shack and tattered furniture lying about and finally reaching the tunnel leading towards Hogwarts.

"Lupin... I miss him too, you know," Harry suddenly blurted out.

Lupin's figure became rigid, like he was trying to control his emotions, and without turning back, Harry heard Remus croak, "Me too."

-X-

Ron was sleeping peacefully. His ribs were heavily bandaged because one of his lungs got punctured while fighting the Death Eaters. It had been repaired by the Matron but needed healing.

Harry was sitting beside Ron's bed looking at his bandages, blaming himself for Ron's injuries; with, Hermione, who was fidgeting with her robes; Ginny, who was curled up on a chair; and Luna, who was staring fixatedly at the ceiling.

"It's no use sitting here, go to bed, all of you," Madam Pomfrey ordered them to leave.

When they all reluctantly started rising, Dumbledore came in.

"I would like all of you to join me in my office, there are matters to be cleared. Just run along and I'll be there in a minute."

They made their way towards Dumbledore's office, where Harry uttered the password,

"Fainting fancies."

The office looked peaceful. The headmaster portraits were feigning their ignorance, seeing new faces. Fawkes was not present on his golden perch. *Must have gone for some errand*, Harry thought.

They all took seat near the blazing fire.

The silence was broken by Hermione. "I'm so sorry, Harry."

"What for?" Harry asked confused.

"For not coming here to get help..."

Suddenly the office was filled with low murmurs as the old headmasters and headmistresses started whispering among each other.

"Hermione, are you mad? I'm glad that you didn't! I would have blamed myself if anything would have happened to Ron. He's my best friend, just as you are!" Harry couldn't understand why Hermione was behaving that way.

The whispering became more pronounced.

"I thought, you were angry with me," she sobbed throatily, while Harry turned to Ginny for help. Before even giving her a look, Ginny was right beside Hermione patting her shoulder and calming her down.

"Have I interrupted something?" Professor Vidal inquired, coming inside the office.

"Oh no, not at all. She's just a little upset," said Luna, and started staring at Professor Vidal with her bulging eyes, instead of the ceiling.



Vidal was soon relieved of the one to be stared at, as Dumbledore, Remus, McGonagall and Snape entered the office and Luna's gaze shifted towards Dumbledore instead.

"Let's recount today's events, shall we? Why don't we start with Miss Granger?" Dumbledore motioned to Hermione, giving her an encouraging smile.

"Umm... we were ambushed in the Shrieking Shack by the Death Eaters along with Draco Malfoy, Crabbe and Goyle," she said glaring at Snape.

"May I ask you, Miss Granger, what exactly were you all doing at the Shrieking Shack?" Snape asked, looking very interested.

Before Hermione or Harry could answer, Remus interrupted, daring Snape to say anything else, "I think what is more important, *Severus*, is what actually happened there."

With murmurs of agreement, Hermione started again, "I was going to go through the Whomping Willow's passageway to the school but was followed by Malfoy, Crabbe and Goyle inside the Shack. After some struggle I bounded them with ropes and thought better of it and followed Ron because- because, I was simply worried." Hermione faltered at this point. "When I followed Ron's tracks, I saw that there were two Dementors who were circling him and his Patronus was not strong enough to overpower them. When the Death Eaters saw me coming, they also jumped in the circle and we dueled and were soon joined by Luna." Hermione hesitated again as she looked towards Luna who only shrugged.

"I was just going through the Hogsmeade forest when I heard shouts and laughter," Luna said vaguely. "So, I went near to check it out and joined the duel with Hermione. And then something weird happened. Suddenly, the atmosphere somehow changed and I- I can swear that I saw some sparks flying from a point, I think from someone who was wearing an invisibility cloak. I think, the sparks were some warning signal because they took care of the Death Eaters. But before Disapparating a Death Eater did the Bronchial Spell on Ron. And you all know what happened next," Luna finished.

"What was the color of the sparks shot by that invisible person?" Vidal asked, rubbing his one-day stubble.

"Blue."

"Anything more, the two of you would like to add?" McGonagall inquired.

"No... nothing else," said Hermione, looking tentatively at Harry.

"Harry, your turn," said Lupin.

"I was chased by the Death Eaters when I slipped down the slope. I saw someone there; I didn't have a good look because my glasses were caked with dirt. Still, whoever it was, was wearing a school robe, so must be a Hogwarts student. And then I saw that Gateway again, just like the one in the Platform Nine and Three-Quarters. If Ginny hadn't used the binding spell, I would have been-" Harry motioned his hands like flying a paper plane.

Hermione and Lupin glared at him; Dumbledore coughed; while Ginny tried to look not too pleased with herself.

"Did you recognize anybody in the Death Eaters' group?" Remus asked.

"Rodolphus Lestrangle, Lucius Malfoy, Crabbe, Goyle, Nott and Wormtail maybe."

"Ah... very well. Severus, as Malfoy, Crabbe and Goyle belong to your House, you need to give them a warning. This time there is no concrete evidence but they wouldn't be so fortunate next time. And I would warn all of you to be wary of your surroundings; it seems we have a turncoat among us and we have to find that student, before he or she does something eternally harmful.

"I have informed Molly and Arthur about Ron's condition. Don't get worried because Poppy has informed me that he'll be well in a few days. I would request all of you to go to your dormitories and have a good night cap," said Dumbledore, with a finality in his voice.

There were so many questions revolving in Harry's mind, but he assumed that they had to wait patiently for the right answers.

-x.X.x-

## - CHAPTER 15 - Mystery Resolved (Part I) -

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Amelia Bones's visit to Hogwarts had been through one delay after another without any plausible reason. The students were told that many international matters were at hand and the Minister had to keep up with the new laws conceded by the International Confederation of Wizards about the coming unpredictable times.

After the appointment of the new Minister of Magic, for a change, laws were finally followed and every magical being was given their rightful status.

And in spite of the palpable dread in the air, there were little sparks of hope here and there which made the wizarding community believe that things would somehow be better for good.

Daily Prophet had finally abandoned the attempts of sliding Harry's name in every article; the Boy-Who-Lived charade was deserted, much to Harry's relief.

And Grawp became a celebrity overnight...

After the '*crooked incident*', as Ron dubbed Grawp's appearance near the Forbidden Forest, there was a lot of hue and cry made by the parents over their children's well being, highlighting the points that Giants are suppose to be the pinnacle of cruelty, and how there are an infinite number of chances that they would eat the students alive.

However, when the Ministry officials came to investigate, they were very disappointed-to put it mildly-because the Giants turned out to be friendly and didn't harm anybody unless they were poked with tree branches repeatedly.

During their investigation, the Centaur leader Magorian paid them a visit, closely followed by some of his loyalists, to ward the humans off the forest. But a simple talk turned into a clash when the centaurs found that the humans were from the Ministry, much to Hagrid's amusement, because after that if there were any doubts left about the Giants, the officials overlooked them in a hurry.

So, after a lot of mumbling, squatting and scowling after the centaurs, the officials from the Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures gave their verdict that the Giants could indeed live in the Forbidden Forest to balance out the forest's habitat.

Hagrid threw a party to celebrate Grawp and Krucky's freedom, which turned out to consist of rock-cakes and tea. Harry, Ginny and Hermione almost broke their teeth trying to take a bite off the cakes, but still stayed back to keep Hagrid from consuming too much fire-whisky and were rewarded by Dumbledore's scrumptious cup cakes at the end, who visited the hut in the evening.

Within the Hogwarts grounds, the DA classes went on smoothly. They were scheduled to be three times a week, conducted by different professors, and the original DA classes conducted by Harry and Professor Lupin entered more undiscovered grounds, except no other fainting episodes were reported.

-x-

Ron was recovering speedily. Madam Pomfrey did her best for her patients, being extra careful after the incident of potion switching done by some crazed lunatic.

"Take that, you stupid git," Ron shouted, as he sent his knight after Harry's castle. The upper half of his body was still covered in bandages, but according to the Matron he was on the way to recovery. His bedside table was filled with 'Get well soon' cards from his family, team-mates and friends.

Harry was propped on Ron's bed and they were playing wizard's chess. As always, Harry was losing.

Without even missing a beat, Ron continued, "So, here I was surrounded by Dementors and Hermione comes shrieking, like I was dying or something... It was like, she was this fiery Queen saying, '*Get away from him! Don't hurt him!*'" Ron mimicked Hermione's voice and was shaking his head but Harry could read beyond Ron's red face and pretence that he was more than pleased, like a kid who got his Christmas present early.

"And being injured has its plus points," Ron said grinning broadly, motioning to his bulging supply of Chocolate Frogs and cards. "No classes to attend, no homework to be done-"

"No DA classes to look forward to, which means that you would have to do the big binge later on," said Harry, giving him a sly smile.

Ron groaned. "I'm no Hermione that I would catch up on my homework here rather than relaxing, but can't I attend the DA classes?" Ron finished pleadingly.

"Well, I can't let you, because you haven't healed fully. Still, I'll teach you the missed lessons in Christmas holidays."

"C'mon, I'll be a good boy; I will just sit and watch," Ron gave him a boyish smile.

"Visiting time over," Madam Pomfrey hollered from her office.

"Ah well, time to go, mate, and that smile won't work on me, but you can try it on girls... especially, a bushy-haired girl," Harry said grinning wickedly, while Ron's ears went rather pink.

"I'll bring you some homework for a change in the evening." Harry winked while Ron blanched.

-X-

Harry made his way towards Dumbledore's office for his third Legilimency class. He was hugging his muffler tight around his neck from the encroaching frosty winds of December, bellowing through the windows, making his hair look messier than usual.

As he entered the office, Dumbledore mumbled, "Time already?"

He was signing some official looking papers.

"Sometimes, a day should have forty-eight hours, but alas! That is not to be... So, how are you, Harry?" Dumbledore asked, looking through his half moon spectacles.

"Fine. Er... Professor?"

Dumbledore smiled, as if he knew what was coming next. "Yes, Harry?"

"Can you tell me about that mysterious gateway?" Harry came right to the point.

"Oh... Well, why not?" Dumbledore stroked his beard as he pondered for awhile. "The gateway that you saw in the platform and in Hogsmeade could lead to anywhere. I don't precisely know its actual location because to discover that, you would have to journey through it. However, I can tell you this from reliable sources; it is not very pleasant."

Harry suddenly remembered the scream of the Death Eater who was sucked into the Gateway in Platform Nine and Three-Quarters.

"Err... does that mean that they are some kind of Portkeys?"

"Well, no, actually. Portkeys are used to reach places which are visible to people, with clear walls, surroundings, definition, etc; that is, places that are not bewitched to be hidden."

"Hidden places?" Harry questioned and before Dumbledore could answer he continued on, "Is Hogwarts one of those places?"

"No. Let's put it this way. It's another world all of its own with its own defined laws devised by some powerful wizard.

"There are places beyond, Harry, which are undiscovered; covert places unknown to man, or rightly said, Muggles. However, not all wizards know about it because they don't concern themselves with such things or simply are not aware of it. According to my knowledge, most of these places were sealed decades ago and you could only find reference to such places in old books which are out of the market or in the restricted section of Libraries."

"Are you telling me that there are worlds beyond our world?" Harry gave Dumbledore a quizzical expression.

"Yes, there are worlds beyond ours and some of us have traveled to the other side too... Many years ago, in nineteen thirty-six to be exact, when Grindelwald was gathering power, the time when Dementors were with the dark side, a unique prison was invented by a council of wizards, belonging to the old school of learning. By using a fusion of ancient spells, they formulated '*the Prison Hollow*' for enslaving the dark wizards-A world to imprison the wrong doers."

"A prison like Azkaban?"

"Yes. But with Grindelwald's fall, there was no need to continue with such tight security and the travel through the gateway was getting on many wizards' nerves. So, like all tiring and lengthy ways are forgotten and abandoned with time, the Prison Hollow also became obsolete and with the Dementor's alliance, the Ministry became over confident and formed Azkaban Prison for the Dementors' delight. After that the way to the Prison Hollow was sealed."

Harry had predicted that Dumbledore would clear off the topic, but too much information was making his head spin. Now there was some covert world to deal with.

"The Prison Hollow was not the only hidden world, because many wizards and witches have formulated their own worlds to leave their mark on this one, but with the permission of the Ministry of course, to maintain tabs on them. The records are still stored at every Ministry Headquarters." With a pause, he continued, "With the course of time, these worlds became ancient and were finally abandoned, like old writings on walls. One thing that nobody observed was that many wizards were powerful enough to overwrite the Ministry procedures and many such worlds are still there which have never been discovered at all, except by their inventors or their predecessors."

"So, how do we find these undiscovered worlds?" Harry asked, totally engrossed in the discussion.

"There are explorers in our midst too, not the ones like Muggles wrecking havoc in ancient excavations of their ancestors, but the wizard explorers who find the *Links* scattered throughout to those undiscovered worlds. A whole branch of the Department of Mysteries



deals with such portals, which are scrutinized by some handpicked Unspeakables."

*Unspeakables!* "Err... what kind of Links?"

"To reach any place, you have to find the way leading to it. The Links are the portals to the worlds beyond, which are extended and are made enterable by expanding that point. The revolving gateway that you saw was doing just that-opening some other world's doorway for you."

"The portals can be opened anywhere?"

"Yes, except only in Hogwarts and you can consider Gringotts too because of too much bewitchment. The witch or wizard only needs to find that Link and summon it anywhere and expand it to enter the world beyond."

"This means that anybody can summon the Link to expand it to a Gateway?"

"Well, it requires quite an advanced magical technique and strength. That's why I was worried that a student doing that is a red alert for us."

It was becoming difficult to digest all this information for Harry, because with every answer, new questions came popping to his mind like some chain-reaction.

"Can it be Voldemort? Doing all this, I mean?"

"I don't see any other explanation for it, Harry. Maybe he has found that spell and has formulated his own world..."

The mere thought of which made Harry shudder. A world of Voldemort would mean death and everything dark ever thought of by wizard-kind, which reminded him of the night at the graveyard where Cedric had died and Voldemort was resurrected. Harry gave another involuntary shudder.

"... or maybe he has found a Link to some other world. As you were present both the times the portal was summoned, the probability of him trying to capture you is too immense to disregard."

With a sudden golden spark, Fawkes came fluttering towards Dumbledore carrying a piece of parchment in his beak.

Dumbledore stood up after reading the note and went towards his cupboard; detached some silvery strands from his head and placed them in the Pensieve.

"Well, it seems that we'll have to postpone our lesson." And before Harry could utter another word, Dumbledore was gone with a flash, leaving a single golden phoenix-feather floating behind him.

Harry closed the office doors with a sigh and trudged towards the common room, thinking about the reason, why everything happened to him, when he was shoved by the most unlikely person he could think of.

-x.X.x-

## - CHAPTER 15 - Mystery Resolved (Part II) -

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It was Colin Creevey who shoved him aside to a corner. Harry was amazed to see that a whole gang of gnomes, patrolled by Peeves were heading towards some specific destination.

Only the sound of left, left, left right left, left, left, left right left, was missing from their organized line.

"What are you doing, Colin?" Harry almost screamed. But he had to change his tone instantly by looking at Colin who was laughing manically.

"Isn't this just great?" Colin asked, laughing hysterically.

"What?" Harry was wrong-footed. *What is it with Colin?*

"Letting loose the gnomes after the house-elves?" Colin provided, grinning toothily.

"You are doing WHAT!" Harry yelled, alarmed.

Between bouts of laughter Colin managed incoherently, "I dunno how; Peeves did it or may be it was because of Mrs. Norris? He just liked my idea and combined all the gnomes of Hogwarts to scare off all the house-elves from the kitchen."

Harry couldn't believe his ears. "But- but, what would you get from scaring off the house-elves?"

He tried to rationalize with him, while all along S.P.E.W. was circling his mind. Harry was never too vociferous about house-elf rights like Hermione, who kept badgering everybody who would listen to donate money for the cause. According to him house-elves liked the life they led but if they *wanted* wages like Dobby, there was no harm done in giving them the status they desired. But pranking them without any apparent reason was nothing but cruel.

"Colin! Are you out of your mind? You'll have detention for a whole month for only thinking of doing such a stunt. McGonagall will eat you

for lunch! Come with me, we'll stop Peeves before he herds all the gnomes in the kitchen."

Colin looked at him in disbelief, like he was looking at him with a new light and didn't like what he was seeing-as though suddenly his Hero image of Harry was shattered.

"Why would I stop Peeves? It's such a great idea! The whole school will know what a superior prankster I am," Colin puffed out his chest and shook his head resolutely.

Harry didn't know how to handle this situation. If he ran to any professor, Colin would be in trouble and if he didn't do something about the situation, the house-elves will be in trouble and he didn't have any time to rationalize with Colin, who was still grinning broadly.

"Er... Colin, why don't you run along? I have to go to the Library, all right?"

"Yeah... erm ... okay. Why don't you announce to the students sitting in the Library that there's a funny show near the kitchen?" Colin asked hopefully.

"Err... I will see," said Harry, giving him a look.

Harry pelted towards the common room like an arrow, jostling people out of his way.

"Hey, watch where you going!" a Slytherin girl shrieked at him, but he pretended not to notice.

As predicted, Hermione was poring over an Arithmancy book in the common room. He ran straight towards his room for his invisibility cloak, hollering at Hermione, "Red Alert!"

She didn't understand but became ready for Harry to return. In a flash he was thundering down the steps leading to the Boys Dormitory.

"Let's go! We don't have any time to waste," Harry said hurriedly.

"What happened?" Hermione asked flabbergasted.

On their marathon towards the kitchen through tapestries and secret passageways, he was only able to utter, "House-elves in trouble."

"WHAT! But- but, who would-"

Harry cut off Hermione. "If we hurry, we'll still be able to reach the kitchen before them. We'll discuss the finer points later on, okay?" Harry finished between huffs of breaths.

"Them whooooo?"

Halfway through the way, they bumped into Neville and Harry availed the timely appearance instantly.

"Neville, do us a favor, will you? Find Nick and tell him to tip off any professor about Peeves disturbing the house-elves and don't go running to any professor yourself. Okay?"

Neville blinked like he didn't believe what he was hearing as his eyes narrowed, but by looking at their strained expressions, he replied, "Okay."

They bolted again. Harry pressed a block behind a moldy tapestry which slid halfway through to reveal a well-lit corridor, decorated by portraits of many exotic fruits.

"In the cloak!" Harry whispered, motioning to Hermione. They could hear commotion, near the stone staircase.

"Hermione, think of some trick to stop all the gnomes."

"Gnomes!"

Before even hearing the response, Harry got an idea. "*Blocus Cloturio*," he whispered, directing his spell on the stretch of the corridor just beside the portrait containing the ticklish green pear.

A golden mist came out of his wand and sparkled that stretch of the corridor, its tiny particles catching the light of the torches.

"Harry, what did you?" Hermione sounded amazed.

"Shush, Hermione. Just clear off Colin from there; he'll be in big trouble if he gets caught," Harry gave her directions to the stairways, dodging the golden mist.

Hermione was instantly on the case by the time first gnome flipped in the mist. He saw her drag Colin into the passageway. At that exact moment Professor Vidal jumped the steps to reach the corridor. He doubled over, laughing heartily on the scenario of the whole gnome army upside down, trapped in the golden mist. The bonus prize was, Peeves, also stationary and screeching madly-not at all his cackling self.

*Trapping gnomes was alright*, Harry smiled to himself, as he made his way towards the common room.

When he entered the common room, Colin was sitting subdued in a corner and Hermione was pacing in front of him, ignoring all other students.

"Was everything okay?" Hermione asked worriedly.

"Yes, nobody kidnapped the house-elves," he said cheerily. "Professor Vidal came just in time." He wasn't sure to discuss any further.

Sensing his trepidation, Hermione started, "Colin's fine. He just wanted to stir things up a bit before everybody went for holidays."

"You all did troublemaking all the time!" Colin said defensively.

"Well, Colin, we never hurt anybody intentionally," Harry reasoned simply.

-x-

Not too distant from the window of the Gryffindor tower, someone was pacing a stretch of Hogwarts' ground, brooding and not at all happy.

*My plans keep on failing. How will I go home this holiday and face... let's just not think about that right now...*

*Why does Harry slither from every trap I set? Why do his stupid lucky stars never leave him?*

*It's high time that I get some help... reinforcements... YES!*

-X-

Ron recovered in two days and he only had a day of practice for their next match against Hufflepuff. In their second match of the season, Gryffindors very predictably hammered the Hufflepuff team. The game was over in twenty minutes. The match only lasted that long because of the weather-it was gusty and difficult for Harry to glimpse the Golden Snitch in such conditions.

As soon as he did, he caught it without any trouble in spite of the fact that the Hufflepuff seeker had a Nimbus2003.

There was an all-night party in the Gryffindor Tower and a kind of farewell for the students who were leaving for Christmas holidays.

Mrs. Weasley had already informed them that they would be staying at Grimmauld Place for Christmas. Hermione would join them halfway through, as she would be staying with her parents for the first half of the vacations.

Hogwarts was again flowing with Christmas trees and dwarfs singing Christmas carols. Most of the students were packing their trunks, getting ready to leave.

It was the second year in a row that Harry was leaving Hogwarts for Grimmauld Place for Christmas. Hogwarts have always been his home-what he never got from the Dursleys, he got from Hogwarts. Leaving was not always easy and he still had some old memories to overcome.

Harry, Ron and Hermione were taking a walk near the lake. It was their last day at Hogwarts and their Defense Against the Dark Arts class was cancelled. So, they planned on enjoying themselves fully with a visit to Hagrid's hut. Ginny was still attending classes, as it was her O.W.L. year and no teacher was ready to compensate.

"It was a very nice cameo appearance, Hermione," Harry teased Hermione on her rescuing Ron. "Come-back with a punch." He grinned.

"Oh stop it, Harry!" she said going red, while Ron's grin widened.

"Whoa!" Ron exclaimed as Hedwig came soaring towards Harry. A small piece of parchment was tied to her leg. They joined their heads to read the scrawled writing.

*"Meet m e in the Room of Requirement, today at half past eight. - Cho"*

Ron ahemed and Hermione went, "Oh dear!"

Harry was still squinting at the parchment while Hedwig was annoyingly nibbling his ear. But except the writing the message was clear as daylight.

Harry patted Hedwig and told her there was nothing edible in his pockets, on which she huffily took flight, beating her wings on his face.

"Girls!" Harry rolled his eyes and was awarded with a glare from Hermione.

"What are you going to do, mate?" Ron asked uncertainly.

"Dunno... meet her, I guess?" He looked pleadingly at his friends for some words of wisdom but Hermione and Ron both became quite tight-lipped on the subject.

"Why don't we visit Hagrid?" Ron suggested, changing the subject.

They pounded on the hut's door and heard Fang's scratching. As they opened the door he launched himself on Ron, slobbering all over him.

"Good boy, Fang – now gerroff me!" Ron yelled from underneath.

Hagrid, as they found out, was not home.

"On some errand maybe," Hermione rationalized, looking disappointed.



"Visiting Grawp and Krucky, I guess?" Ron provided.

"Yeah, that would be it," Harry said detachedly, his mind still on Cho's note.

The afternoon wore on to evening. After eating dinner they were playing chess in the common room-Ginny verses Hermione-and Ron was whispering commands in Hermione's ear, much to the annoyance of his sister.

"Cheater!"

"Yeah, yeah." Ron grinned.

Harry was examining a particularly jagged part of his chair's handle. It was eight o'clock and Ron was signaling him to get a move on. He thanked Gryffindor, Merlin and his fates, as he went out of the common room, that Ginny didn't notice his departure.

He strode straight towards the statue of Barnabas the Barmy, surveying the corridor and Marauder's map for being absolutely sure. Except the dots reading Chang and Potter there was no one else on the floor.

He opened the door, with his heart doing a boom-doom beat against his chest. The first thing that he noticed after entering the room was a peculiar whiff of scent which wafted all over him. The room was not as big as he remembered but was welcoming in its own way, filled with dim wavering lights and drapes, and decorated with fluffy looking couches and colorful portraits.

"Er... Hi, Cho." He was feeling wrong footed from the beginning.

"Hello, Harry," Cho said shyly.

She was looking different somehow. It was her hair or clothes, Harry couldn't put his finger on it.

"So, you wanted to talk to me?" he asked, coming to the point.

"Yes, Harry." She looked nervous as she stepped closer to him, rubbing her thumb on the sides of her index finger.

"Harry... I was really insensitive last year... I- I just wanted to talk to someone... you know, really talk... and I was sooo torn, so torn between you and- and Cedric..." She sighed.

*Oh boy!*

"I didn't know what I was doing, whether I was right or not... it was very wrong of me to break it off with you like that... but it was never the same again, Harry... the way I felt with you... I have never felt with anyone," Cho came closer and Harry could see her shining eyes, shadowed by her silky hair.

*Oh damn it!*

"It was never the same again... Harry... I think I-I love you..." she trailed off as she came closer than Harry could handle.

-X-

In the Gryffindor common room Hermione check-mated Ginny. And Ginny pondered, *Why it felt like she was losing more than a game?*

-x.X.x-

## CHAPTER 16 – Trouble at Quarters

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They were on the Hogwarts Express heading back to Platform Nine and Three Quarters, where they were going to be picked up by Tonks and Lupin.

Harry was sitting near the window, lost in his own whirlwind of thoughts which were hammering each other inside his head. He had a pained expression like a teenager whose wisdom teeth came out early.

Harry hadn't told his friends about what happened in the Room of Requirement and they hadn't been too eager to ask either. An unseeingly coldness came between them from nowhere, as he kept on observing Ron and Hermione looking at him questioningly when he wasn't looking at them. Just a little unconscious glance which told him all and Ginny still didn't know anything about his shenanigans.

He felt guilty, he felt torn and bewildered on his own behavior. It was not like him at all... how could he have...?!

Cho had almost thrown herself at him and at first he was too shocked to even flinch but inside his mind something pounded his senses that made him extricate himself from Cho's grasp in a hurry. One part of him wanted to continue, while the resolute part of him wanted to run away.

Without saying anything, he had left Cho in the Room of Requirement and almost bolted straight to the dormitory.

He was too ashamed of himself to talk about it with his friends and every time he looked at Ginny or whenever she smiled at him, everything just shriveled up inside in shame. It was like a secret talisman that he was hiding within, not strengthening him, but not leaving him alone either.

Crookshanks came over to him purring softly and folded himself in his lap. Harry was relieved by the distraction supplied by the ginger furry ball of a cat.

Luna entered the compartment and glared at Harry. "Are you feeling all right?" she asked, accusation trickling down her every word.

Harry gave a start. "Er... yeah..."

"Is everything alright, Luna?" asked Ginny concernedly.

Harry knew that Luna somehow knew about whatever had happened and pleaded with his eyes, not to discuss it any further.

"Uh... yes. Harry just looked a little pale to me," Luna said evenly and went out of the compartment, slamming the door on its hinges.

"What's with her?" Ron said incredulously, while the others shrugged, but Harry thanked Luna's strange behavior, for preventing any further suspicion, pointed towards him.

They all said their good-byes to Hermione and headed for the barrier with a weedy looking witch and Lupin.

They traveled by the Knight Bus to Grimmauld Place. By the time they reached it everyone was disheveled beyond recognition, due to the continuous displacement of luggage, seat, and guts, caused by the super speed of the bus.

"Bye, 'Arry!" said Stan the bus conductor, while Tonks glared at him vehemently.

Mrs. Weasley was already waiting for them. She grasped Harry in the entrance as soon as he stepped inside, giving him a super suffocating hug.

"Harry dear! I was so worried! You are alright aren't you?" she said, surveying him closely.

"Yes, yes, Mrs. Weasley, I'm fine."

"Oh that dreadful Gateway! And those Death Eaters," she continued clenching her fists. Harry looked at Ron pleadingly for a rescue.

“Mum!” Ginny came in between and hugged her mother, saving Harry from a big tirade, much to Harry’s dismay.

It was just a small gesture of camaraderie but Harry wanted to kick himself; a feeling of guilt swept over him and he couldn’t narrow down the reason as he fleetingly gazed into Ginny’s sparkling brown eyes.

--

Christmas decorations at the Grimmauld Place were subdued and Harry noticed the extra cleanliness of the place, which must have been due to Dobby and Winky.

Try as he might, Harry couldn’t ignore Ron’s long stares forever and as dreaded, Ron at last cornered him at night after dinner, when they were all set for bed.

“Well?”

“Er... well, what?”

“You know what I am talking about, Harry!”

Harry sighed. “Well, I myself don’t know what happened exactly....”

Ron huffed even more. “So, what do you know?”

Harry told him, truthfully what had happened and as he went deep into the incident—from Cho’s throwing herself at him to the few seconds of the kiss they shared—Ron’s eyes bulged out even more.

The finale ‘Ron reaction’ was so graphically pertinent that Dobby, who was in the process of entering the room, gave a loud squeak, about-turned and jumped outside, covering his ears with his long spindly fingers.

“Do you reckon she has some ulterior motive?” Ron asked, scratching his head.

“I dunno!” Harry almost whined. “I can’t make up my mind.... When I’m not with her, everything is all right and I don’t feel anything. But

when she comes near me... everything jams up. I can't think straight and just go... nuts!"

Ron surveyed Harry closely but, as people say, when truth is spoken, it speaks louder than words. Ron had to believe his friend for good.

"Tough luck that Hermione is not here or she would have explained the complex mind of girls," Ron said snickering.

"Yeah," Harry replied distractedly.

--

The Christmas came with Ron shaking Harry up from a dream of the same white shimmering light. Harry had the distinct impression that he recognized the voice but still couldn't figure out who it actually belonged to.

After freshening up, he at first went to see Buckbeak, who was looking more down than ever—his fur was shedding and he looked sick.

*He can't be cooped up here forever; he needs to go out... I guess, he needs his wild life back,* Harry thought.

A memory flickered past by ... *God rest ye merry Hippogriffs...*

He signed heavily. He suddenly didn't feel hungry anymore, the sinking feeling was back again, but before it could take over, he sprang up suddenly and giving Buckbeak a last pat on its beak, he headed towards the kitchen.

Almost everyone was congregated there and were busy opening their respective gifts. For Harry there was the usual jumper from Mrs. Weasley, a new Dark Arts book from Hermione, trendy dress robes from Lupin and an assortment of the Weasley's Wizarding Wheezes and Honeydukes Chocolates from Ron and the Weasley brothers.

Dobby had again done the trick of 'HAVE A VERY HARRY CHRISTMAS' and nobody had corrected it, much to Harry's chagrin. Tonks followed his stare and gave him a meaningful wink.

Ron was busy gossiping with the twins. Ginny was helping her mother and Lupin was talking in turns with Tonks of clearing off all the strewn wrappings from the table.

Harry was still not meeting Ginny's eyes for some reason and it was evident from her posture that she also understood that something was amiss, because she had wished him, "Happy Christmas" very curtly.

*Did Luna tell her, whatever she knew?*

George offered a pasty to Tonks audibly.

"Oh thanks, George," she said earnestly, not getting the joke.

Within a second Tonks turned into a toad. Everybody burst out laughing seeing the brownish toad with a pinkish top croak balefully at them.

In a minute she turned back to herself again and joined the laughter but said very touchingly, "You could have just said so, I could have easily morphed into a stinking toad!"

Harry was laughing at the right time and saying, "Yeah," with the others but actually he was in deep thought, above all the vibrancy. *What did that voice meant? What was it chanting—*

There was a sudden silence as the fireplace glowed green and rose high. Kingsley Shacklebolt stepped out of the fire in a hurry.

"Sorry for crashing the party, but there is an emergency and no time to waste. There has been an attack by the Death Eaters at Privet Drive."

"WHAT?" was the general response.

"At my aunt's place?" Harry asked unbelievably.

"Yes, so no time to waste. Tonks, Lupin let's go, shall we?"

Lupin and Tonks sprang up and headed for the fireplace when Harry bellowed, "Now wait just one minute. Why am I not going? It's supposed to be my aun-... uh... summer lodging place... er... I have to go too," Harry finished unsure of his sudden burst of emotions.

Lupin eyed him closely, while Ron piped up, "If he's going, then we are going too."

"Yeah! We rescued him twice from that dreary place already. We know that place like the back of our hands," Fred said excitedly. George nodded in agreement.

"Moody wouldn't approve, boys," Kingsley said indignantly.

"I guess we can take them, Kingsley. They are getting their training after all and they'll have a firsthand practice."

"Nobody's going anywhere! Are you out of your mind, Remus? Taking children to a Death Eater party! No, no! I will not allow it," Mrs. Weasley yelled over the babble, getting redder with each uttered word.

"Molly, you know as well as I do how important it is to face your enemy? We cannot protect them all the time," Remus said gravely.

"Oh c'mon Mum! We are not kids and it's Harry's aunt after all," Ron provided.

"Harry, I'm not your guardian but I can't let you go and stick your neck out for the Death Eaters to ... to-"

"Cut it off?" Harry said candidly causing Mrs. Weasley's lips to tremble. "Mrs. Weasley, please, I need to do this. Nobody can protect me from anything. Whatever will happen will come about and nobody can help it... if I could do anything to repay their debt on me... it would make things much easier," Harry finished pleadingly, trying to rationalize.

"Oh well... if you really want to go, then go, but you've got to stay out of trouble, not go looking for it," Mrs. Weasley said in hawkish manner, while Ron and the twins whooped with joy.



Before anyone of them could use the Floo powder, they were all hugged by Mrs. Weasley. "Be careful," she said giving a dry sob.

"Oh c'mon, Mum, we are not going on a war. We'll be back before you know it."

However, Harry did notice that her eyes were all misty and Ginny was patting her shoulder for comfort.

Ginny was not looking at him... *Why did that bother him so?*

"We can't go through their fireplace because it is blocked. So, why are we using the Floo powder?" Harry asked incredulously.

"We are going to Figg's. The address is number nine, Wisteria Walk."

Kingsley went first, Tonks followed and Ron and the twins queued after her. Harry glanced back and stared in wonder at the flicker of concern on Ginny's face. Her eyes glowed with apprehension in the reflection of the blazing fire. The contact, which was broken when Lupin nudging him forward, could have spoken louder than words, but as he glanced back again, her eyes were lowered and her face was set. But still, Harry felt a warm glow of determination surround him.

With that last glance, he said, "Number nine, Wisteria Walk," clearly and entered the fireplace.

He could never get over the super fast spinning of traveling by Floo powder. It felt like he was being sucked by a giant vacuum to nothingness. He closed his eyes tight from the overflowing soot and tucked his elbows in, against the numerous fireplaces' walls. And as he thought, he couldn't take it any longer, he fell face first into a moldy carpet, strongly smelling of cabbage.

"Hello, Harry," Mrs. Figg's anxious voice sounded.

He couldn't clearly see her because of all the soot on his glasses. But he sure recognized the furry feline doing rounds near his right leg. Mr. Tibbles was busy rubbing his neck on Harry's ankle.

"Hullo, Mrs. Figg," he replied steadying himself.

While polishing his glasses, he took in the pacing figure of Mrs. Figg who was flapping about in her tartan slippers, wearing curlers minus the hairnet. Moody was poring over an old parchment and the pink cheeked witch he remembered from the advance guard as Hestia Jones, Kingsley, the Weasley trio and Tonks were all peering at the parchment in turns.

The flames grew higher as Lupin came out of the fire coughing, "Never get used to those."

But before anyone could say anything polite in return, Moody gave quite an audible growl, like he had just noticed Harry. "What are you doing here, boy?"

"Er... I thought I'll be of some help."

And before Moody could retort any further, Lupin interrupted, "He is here now, Moody, and it's a high time that he makes his own decisions because usually we are the ones who make them for him."

Moody's both eyes fixed on Lupin for a second, like assessing him, but almost immediately, the magical one started spinning its usual whirr and he waved his hand in a disgruntled sort of way.

"So, now that everything's clear, what are we waiting for? Let's get into action," Kingsley announced.

After hearing the plan and seeing the magically enhanced planning chart, many gasps were stifled with artificial coughs.

"Oh my word... Abby was right! Never open a can full of Flobberworms," Mrs. Figg said nervously, while Hestia Jones giggled, not because of Mrs. Figg's comment but by the unusual attention showered by Mr. Tibbles, who was meowing to her non-stop.

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When Harry reached Privet Drive, he had to re-adjust to believe that he was indeed standing on the same Privet Drive road, which had seen more action in the dark of nights, since Harry came to live there, compared to the rest of the years of its existence.

He had almost forgotten how Privet Drive looked in winters, because he hadn't spent one since he was accepted in Hogwarts. Almost everything was covered by snow, from the rooftops to cars, from the once immaculate lawns to the bird baths. The calm Privet Drive was calmer than usual, almost eerily serene.

A white cat, almost the color of snow streaked past him. If it hadn't been for its unusually bright emerald eyes, Harry wouldn't have noticed it at all. A teenage girl with pink streaked black hair was rounding the corner of Privet Drive. From her overlarge leather jacket to the punky get up, it looked like she was heading to or coming from a rock concert.

Ron was standing beside him near the number four crossing, counting down the time in faint whispers: *four ... three ... two ... one.*

In a succession of seconds, many things happened at once.

*CRACK*

*WHAM*

*CRACK*

*BOOM*

*CRAAASH!*

Lupin and Kingsley had tried to Apparate near the gate of number four. The snow-white cat had tried to get near the house as well, but an invisible force had propelled all of them away from the house.

At the same time, an invisible pulse went through the area surrounding number four, like a booming earthquake, shaking them all and spreading a small avalanche of snow all over. Without even missing a beat, Lupin and Kingsley Apparated from the doorway again.

"Where do you reckon, they went?" Ron asked in a whisper.

“I think, they were successful in Apparating inside the house,” Harry answered with a hunch.

He and Ron were the only one who couldn't Apparate, therefore they were left to cover the Privet Drive distance on foot. They both were nearing the main entrance of number four and there was no glitch in the plan, until almost ten Death Eaters materialized beside them, with the sound of the usual cracks.

Harry was getting used to many Death Eaters popping all over the place. Therefore, in a mechanical way he started dueling along with Ron, whose face was scrunched up in determination.

*“Impedimenta!”*

*“Stupefy!”*

*“Obscurio!”*

*“Tarantallegra!”*

If it weren't for the ambiguous situation, they would have laughed on the Death Eater – for doing ‘the dance.’

They were soon joined by Moody and Kingsley, much to their relief. Harry noticed little bangs going off inside the house, but couldn't get a clear view. Moody shoved Harry and Ron in the house. “Better inside than outside,” he growled.

Harry had the distinct impression that he was entering some other house, because of all the clutter and strewn furniture. All the unnatural squeaky cleanliness was gone; instead, the house was turned into a slob's perfect domain.

Hestia Jones was dueling two Death Eaters in the main corridor, Ron jumped in and Harry was about to do the same when he was distracted by a screaming Death Eater, who pranced in the corridor, clutching his face, which was filled with ugly boils. In a matter of seconds, another Death Eater whose head was missing, walked past blindly, followed by a fat ferret, but the most funniest was a rubber

duck, which was squawking hopelessly with its plastic mouth and was almost stamped by the next Death Eater.

George's grinning face appeared at the end of the corridor, calling after the running Death Eater, whose backside was smoldering brightly.

"Hey you! Where are you running to? Don't you know your tail's on fire?!"

Ron and Hestia had stunned the two Death Eaters, and Harry had the clear way to reach the living room for any sign of the Dursleys. The scene that he saw could only be classified as being pathetic.

Vernon Dursley, the man who's never unhinged by anything (that is what he liked to suppose), was sprawled in a corner, out cold. Petunia Dursley, Miss High and Mighty, was crying over Vernon, clutching Duddly, Mister Muscleman Big D, who was whimpering like an injured whale.

His aunt gave a blood curdling shriek seeing Harry, which brought many Death Eaters' attention towards the living room.

Before he could react, he was hit by a spell which smashed him to the nearest wall. For a second, he totally blacked out, but as he opened his eyes, he came face to face with Lucius Malfoy, whose mask was askew and his wand was pointed threateningly at Harry.

"The game is over, Potter," he leered at him.

"No, it's not!" he said incredulously, but was soon compelled to gulp down all the choice words that were coming to his mind.

He was aghast to see his friends, being steered into the living room by a number of Death Eaters. They were all bound by ropes, one way or the other and there was no sign of Moody, Lupin, Kingsley, Tonks or Hestia for that matter.

## **- CHAPTER 17 - Petunia's Confession -**

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When no one came in after Fred, Harry's expression changed from confusion to worry. Lucius Malfoy, following his gaze gave a throaty laugh, enjoying every second of it. He conjured ropes out of his wand and tied his hands too.

"We have sealed the area again, Potter, your little Order will not be able to save you this time! What were you thinking? That we are all fools and don't know how to arrange a successful kill whenever we want to?"

The Death Eaters out and about snickered gleefully; whereas his friends twisted under their grips.

Malfoy was pacing the room as comfortable as a king in his own lair.

"Your little friends and their little tricky toys! Ha! But they lose their touch after a while." Malfoy turned and surveyed Harry closely.

"Now that the time is near, I still can't understand how you survived all these years. You're indeed very slippery, Potter; you kept on squirming by all these years, when you should have died long ago. However, you have fulfilled your purpose by causing our Dark Lord's return. He will be eternally grateful!" Malfoy smirked and raised his wand.

"No!" Ron yelled.

"Aah, the faithful Weasley. Are you getting used to the new found wealth from your worthless brothers' joke shop? Would you like to die first, rather than Potter? Huh?"

Ron looked uncertain for a second but he resolutely replied, "Yes! Why don't you try, you bloody little git!"

Malfoy's wand and expression wavered for a second but the artificial smile came right in place again. "I don't have time for the riff raffs like you, Weasley..."

"Get ready, Potter, for your death." Malfoy sneered.

*"Avada Kedavra!"*

"NOOOOO," Fred, George and Ron screamed in unison.

Fortunately, Harry wasn't hurt. He hadn't even been ready for Malfoy's attack, but miraculously the spell didn't hit him. He felt a glow surround him, which flipped and absorbed the spell.

"Whoa, look at that!" Fred exclaimed, while Ron and George sighed with relief while Malfoy looked stricken.

Lucius Malfoy started muttering, "Well... I was warned about this but... so powerful..."

During the whole progress Petunia kept on clutching Dudley while he practiced being dumb.

However, Malfoy's attention diverted and he screamed at Petunia, "YOU! YOU! It's all because of you. If you hadn't accepted him, this would never have happened. You fool of a woman, not even believing in magic but still... taking over your worthless sister's son! Are you aware of the fact that Potter hates you! I can guarantee that he'll be quite grateful, when I finally finish you off." Malfoy gave Harry a meaningful look, while Harry blanched.

*Why didn't he like whatever Malfoy was saying?* Harry had always hated the Dursleys, his aunt included, but why, when an outsider was saying the same things he had been thinking from years, was it so hurtful?

"Well, your worthless Muggle days are over now, Petunia. You never believed in magic your whole life but now you will die because of the same magic." Lucius Malfoy's eyes sparkled menacingly.

Petunia and Harry screamed at the same time.

Petunia: "NO, it's not true!"

Harry: "NO, I won't let you!"

The words garbled in between but the message went across, as Harry was beside Petunia in a flash. The ropes that bound him didn't even work as they simply slipped away from his body, as if they were commanded to unwind without any said incantation.

Before Malfoy could take in whatever that happened, Harry had used *Expelliarmus* on him. As his wand shot upwards, in the same instant the electric fireplace gave away with a bang and everyone was instantly covered with cemented rubble.

"Aah! The old trick," Fred's reminiscent voice was heard from a corner, as all the absentee members of the Order materialized through the blown-away fireplace.

Moody gave a huge growl seeing Malfoy loitering about. He instantly started dueling with the opposite party along with his fellows. The snowy cat made for the kitchen, streaking past the dueling Death Eaters and Order members.

Petunia was too dazed to utter a single word, as she kept on gawking at all the dueling wizards with saucer shaped eyes. Dudley had all but forgotten about being afraid, as his head bobbed up and down and side ways, with the swish and flicks of wands, his mouth forming a perfect O.

Lupin shoved Harry warningly to the next room. Because of the lack of action, Harry followed the snow-white cat instead, towards the kitchen. There was no sign of the cat; however, Hestia Jones was directing a glowing red lucent sphere with her wand off the table.

"Keep away!" she warned and incanted, "*Finite Incantatem!*"

The red glowing ball perished with a bang, as the house shook on its hinges and a pulse went through all of them. Instantly, the house filled with the sounds of 'CRACKS' as all the Death Eaters Disapparated.

"Chickened out again," Fred grunted loudly, as George made 'puck puck puckah' sounds of a rooster.



Harry made for the living room, not at all frayed by the pulse. Vernon Dursley was still maintaining his position but was relocated to a clean sofa, and his stomach looked fit to burst. The Order members weren't too enthusiastic on bringing him back to his senses. Petunia and Dudley were also relocated to a sofa. She was still in shock and Tonks was tending to her, while Dudley was practicing dumbness again, staring blankly at his hands and not meeting anybody's eyes.

Lupin motioned him to a corner while Kingsley went for combing the house for any other magical amulets, while Hestia made for where Moody was standing.

"I think you should talk to her," Lupin said directly.

"But what could I say to-"

"Harry! We have to know, how they got here, in spite of all the security."

"Security?" Harry asked blankly.

"Did you expect us to leave the Dursleys unguarded? They are the link to your protection. They are watched around the clock, but obviously they don't know, that is, *can't know*."

It was hard for Harry to gulp down that information but he wasn't surprised. He had been watched around the clock from the time Voldemort returned.

He made for his aunt, who was clutching a tissue and was staring into space. He came in between her view and her eyes focused sharply. It was as though she had suddenly realized who he was and why he was staring at her. Her lips quivered, as some words formed but were muffled by her sob.

"Er..." Harry stuttered. He didn't want to see her crocodile tears; he wanted some explanations. "Aunt Petunia..."

As if not hearing him at all, she started to wail as her thin figure shook with the force of her sobs. Dudley looked horrified as he abruptly

stood up but looking at all the wizards lurking about and sat down again facing away from his mother.

Harry looked at Tonks for some help, who instantly started patting his aunt, while the rest of the Order members suddenly became intensely interested in their wands, the rubble, the broken fireplace and the cement covered furniture. Hestia started cleaning the room with *Scourgify* with her back towards Petunia. Ron and the twins hovered in the background awkwardly, trying to be out of his view. They all wanted to give them some privacy but didn't want to risk their safety in the process.

After what seemed like hours, Petunia finally started, "I'm... I'm sorry, Harry."

The words shocked Harry so much that he wanted to pinch himself but overcame the urge. Dudley's figure stiffened and he gave his mother a quick glance without changing position, which caused his neck to crick and him to yelp in pain. Hestia came to his rescue and took him reluctantly towards the kitchen.

"I didn't hate my sister... you wouldn't understand... I loved her, but all that changed when she got her letter and went away to Hogwarts." Her features crinkled, with the mention of his school.

"She became larger than life from then on; it was Lily this, Lily that... Sometimes, my parents even forgot that they had another daughter-a *normal* daughter. I became sick and tired from her examples given out again and again... like my parents were disappointed that I hadn't received a letter from Hogwarts. Every year when she returned, the distance between us grew and it came to such a point that I couldn't bear to look at her because she became what I wished to be..."

She sighed, while her shoulders drooped as if they were heavily burdened. "She entered into a fairytale with your father and I was left behind to live a normal life... But don't think I wasn't contented; we were very much happy," she added defensively.

"After years of calm, you came along and we heard the fleeting news about your parents' deaths. My sister's only child... left on my mercy. It was all in my hands to make or break your life and I reveled in it. I

hated her but loved her still in my own way and you were only a little boy. Vernon was quite skeptical, but we agreed on the fact that we'd never tell you about your kind and their ways. Vernon and I vowed to make you normal like everybody else...

But- but, as I always suspected, Dumbledore sent for you, when you turned eleven and we couldn't do anything to stop you and I was forced to relive my childhood again. You away to Hogwarts and me..." She looked down at her hands, as if trying to read her fate lines and its mysteries.

"We tried our best to stop you but we failed as I had suspected. Now Voldemort has risen again and today the same ancient magic that Dumbledore warned me about-which I never believed-saved both of us from the killing curse."

"You know about *Avada Kedavra*?" he asked in disbelief.

"I read all Lily's school books... I used to sneak her books to my room when she was home for holidays," she said nostalgically. "And I've been in contact with Dumbledore, even when I didn't like to."

Harry continued to stare at her in disbelief.

"In spite of all what we did to you; you came to our rescue and your people saved our lives, and I do remember that you saved Dudley from the Dementors last year."

She sighed dejectedly. "I guess what they say is true... blood runs thicker than water." She looked sadly into his eyes. *Lily's eyes*, she thought desolately.

Harry silently agreed with Petunia, but didn't say a word.

"So, how did the Death Eaters come into the house?" he asked.

She blinked as if suddenly disoriented, but got a hold on herself as she answered, "I was just doing some laundry when I heard whooshing and thudding sounds from the living room. I rushed to find out what it was. There were all these Death Eaters staring at me from their hooded masks."

"Was someone holding anything except their wands?" Lupin interrupted, joining in the conversation.

As if on cue, most of the Order members tuned into the conversation.

"Yes, now that I think about it. One of them was holding a wiper and I thought it to be very peculiar," she replied.

"Bingo," Kingsley boomed, the golden hoops in his ears flickered with his sudden movement.

"An illegal Portkey," Moody growled. He motioned for Kingsley and Hestia near and barked some orders. They Disapparated in an instance, while Tonks and the twins made for the kitchen to baby-sit Dudley, Fred and George jumping excitedly on each other to reach the kitchen first.

"I don't know what happened to Vernon, they must have used some spell on him. And... and Dudley just came thundering down the steps without having any sense to take a peek and run for help or call the police... or something..." Petunia faltered seeing the ironic expression on Moody's already battered face, trying to say something on the lines of, 'What could have Police done to the Death Eaters?'

"They setup something in the kitchen and started rummaging through the house. Most of them were acting like they were waiting for something to happen."

"Waiting for us to show up," Lupin provided, scratching his chin.

"This was a setup from the beginning," Moody growled in anger, accentuated with a pronounced *clunk* of his wooden leg.

"Well, tough luck for them," Ron said in a determined voice, speaking for the first time. "They were against ancient magic, after all."

"That's why the killing curse backfired?" Harry asked.

"Yes, Harry. The blood-magic is quite powerful indeed," Lupin supplied.

"So, what was that globe?" Harry asked Moody and Lupin in general.

"A shelter device, used for making an area impregnable or simply put, erecting anti-apparition wards. That's why we weren't able to enter the house from any safe point."

"Safe point?"

"The protectors must be able to enter somehow, so the house also has some safe points from where you can Apparate inside, but is accessible to very few people," Lupin answered.

"Death Eaters could never have entered this house, but we had overlooked the fact that Voldemort can conjure an illegal Portkey," Moody provided.

Petunia was absorbing all this information with bated breath. "This has been done from when?"

"From the time Harry was left on your doorsteps. We monitored every trespassing wizard and witch near your area. But the current attack was shrewdly planned. Therefore, some more precautionary measures will be called for," Moody said decisively.

"What about Vernon?" Petunia asked timidly.

"He must have fainted; moreover some Death Eater must have stunned him for making sure; I also noticed a trace of Engorgement Charm-"

"As if it was necessary," Ron whispered nastily to Harry, while stifling a chuckle.

"He'll be revived soon," Lupin finished.

"Some wizards will be coming here to straighten things up. We'll revive him after they have done their work. I don't want to upset your husband anymore than he needs to be," Moody said with a trace of smile on his lips.

"As there's nothing left for you to do here, Harry, let's go." Lupin motioned for him.

As if on cue, Dudley came waddling in the room, skipping half the way. "Something bit me. Something BIT me! SOMETHING BIT ME!" he kept on repeating, while dancing all around.

Harry and Ron stifled their laughter with coughing chuckles, while Moody and Lupin couldn't help but look amused, except Petunia, who was trying to calm the toddling injured whale, to no avail.

*"Silencio!"* Harry provided.

Dudley stopped his bouncing and made some hand movements, but nothing came out of his mouth.

"We didn't do anything," Fred and George said in unison coming into the living room, while Tonks almost toppled the lone vase on her way in, as she shook with suppressed laughter.

Harry had the strong suspicion that George had just stuffed something orange in his pocket. There was no Mrs. Weasley to scold them here and Moody was rather enjoying the scene. Lupin however tried to look disapproved but failed miserably.

The Silencing Charm was reversed and Dudley became glued to his mother like a magnate. Lupin signaled Harry again, when he motioned him to wait while mustering up his courage to blurt something out to his aunt, while she looked at him forlornly.

"Er... Aunt Petunia, I never knew, whatever you told me just now. I only wanted some explanations and to know about my parents, like every other kid... and- and, I don't hate you."

Harry spun on his heels and made for the door without waiting for anybody, leaving many mouths agape, especially Dudley's which was almost touching the floor.

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They used the Floo Network from Mrs. Figg to get back. Mrs. Weasley was waiting anxiously by the fire. She clutched all four of them simultaneously in a tight embrace, making them cough even harder because of all the soot. She surveyed them separately up and down, as if trying to find a missing arm or leg which they might have lost during their adventure. When she was thoroughly satisfied, she ordered them to bathe, Lupin and Tonks included, while Moody growled away to the kitchen, intent on avoiding the 'woman possessed'.

Whatever exhilaration Harry had felt before heading towards Little Whining-seeing Ginny's worried expression and the adrenaline rush of the impending adventure-all went above, in a puff of smoke on his return.

He wasn't very sure of his behavior, because of the outcome of the sudden affability with his aunt. Ginny wasn't making things easier either, with the cold vibes that she was sending and a complete disregard towards him. Whatever he saw before stepping into the fire, he hailed them as one of his 'hallucinations' and tried his best to forget all about it.

Hermione joined them shortly and was very disappointed in missing all the action.

*"Aveda Kedavera backfired? ... Really?"*

She couldn't believe her ears and couldn't get enough of the story. Ron kept on embellishing his version of the story to the extent that it became as if he single-handedly saved the Order and Harry from the Death Eaters. But from Hermione's skeptical expressions, he had to revert back to the original, which tallied with Harry's.

As there were only few days left of their Christmas vacations and the homework that he and Ron had procrastinated on was dwindling above their heads. They started squiggling away their homework in a hurry. Hermione tried her best not to chastise them, because as always, her homework had been done ages ago and was safely folded in her trunk.

"Where's the homework planner that I gave you last year?" she asked reproachfully.

"What?" Both said in unison-but too late, as Hermione huffed up like an angry pigeon.

Both of them had chucked the diary away, during their high-pitched anxiety attacks of last year's O.W.Ls.

"Er... I think, it is somewhere in my trunk," Harry said hurriedly.

"Yeah... right! Mine too," Ron provided, not helping matters at all, as Hermione stalked off their room muttering, which sounded something like 'Irresponsible Prats!'

Harry contacted Charlie for shipping Buckbeak to a safe place, which was not easy in the least, because he always seemed to be in hurry or in deep conversation with different Order members. Harry even saw him talking to Snape once, who in response stared mockingly at Harry without any apparent reason.

Harry had tried his best to keep away whenever Snape visited Grimmauld Place. It never seemed right, as he had been the nemesis of his late father and godfather. The memories were too painful to dwell in.

Charlie once cornered, concluded that Forbidden Forest was the safest place for Buckbeak, as the hippogriff would be happy to return to Hagrid, who could easily take care of him during his usual visits to Grawp and Krucky. Harry agreed and with the help of Lupin was able to ship Buckbeak to school.

The remaining holidays flew by without any event, and soon it was time to return to Hogwarts. Harry was actually relieved by the fact, anxiously waiting for Quidditch trainings and hectic N.E.W.T. classes to start again, for keeping his mind off of all the heavier things in his life.

Their first class back was Transfiguration. They had been doing a lot of advanced spell in their N.E.W.Ts Transfiguration class. They had reached the point of transfiguring inanimate objects to vertebrate



animals, ranging from pixies to cats and dogs. Their holiday assignment was a very lengthy essay on human transfiguration, which took half of their homework time because they had to sift through all the old transfiguration books for facts and models.

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## **- CHAPTER 18 - Animagus -**

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Harry hurriedly shoveled through his breakfast because he had overslept due to a string of incoherent dreams he had been having lately, which had jolted him in between sleep and dream, throughout the night.

After finishing his hurried breakfast, he made his way to McGonagall's class along with Ron and Hermione.

Professor McGonagall was already waiting for them in the class. She was standing beside her table and had an air of foreboding calmness around her. When all of them filed through the rows of desks and settled down, she started, "Today, we will learn the most important part of Transfiguration,"-she paused, surveying all the students-"human transfiguration."

Everyone fidgeted in their seats as the butterflies started fluttering in many stomachs.

"Human transfiguration is a very precise process, needing your total concentration. It is not difficult when you master it, as there will be some future Animagi among you. But it is not everybody's cup of tea either, because it is rare and highly regulated, as you have to be registered with the Ministry of Magic," she said, her gaze lingering on Harry.

"Human transfiguration is similar to vertebrate transfiguration but the change is that you will be transfiguring yourselves rather than an inanimate object.

"It is always difficult the first time because nobody can foretell what your Animagus form would be. For the first time you have to incant and use your wand for transfiguration but as you get more practice, and exercise the ability, you will be able to transform without using your wand and incantation. It will be similar to your changing clothes, but the new skin that you will wear, would be of an animal's, of your Animagus form." McGonagall transformed into her Animagus form and back again in a matter of seconds, which produced quite a few "Ohs" and gasps.

"You need to make your body one with your mind, grasping every pore and sense to reveal the dormant creature in you. I should make it clear early on that not all of you would be able to change into your Animagi forms, because many of you wouldn't be able to get in touch with that dormant part in you and thus would never be able to transform.

"Now, before starting the lesson, can you all please stand up?"

They all did, obediently.

She waved her wand which made their desks dissolve into the right and left hand side walls and made the ceiling higher than the Quidditch hoops. With another flick, their class floor was covered with numerous squashy cushions. Some of the students lost their balance because of the sudden appearance of the cushions, like Neville, but many stood still, Harry included. Hermione's faltering figure was saved by the ever helping hand of Ron's.

McGonagall continued, "Make yourself comfortable."

They all sat down ceremoniously. She instructed them about the incantation and wand movement.

"As I have informed you already, many of you wouldn't be able to transform at all. Which could mean two things: you need more practice or you will not be a future Animagus because your inner creature is either too dormant or does not exist. However, this doesn't mean that you are not an able wizard or witch. It simply tells you that human transfiguration is not for you and your specialty lies some place else.

"When some of you will transform, depending upon the size of your Animagus form, you'll be able to remember your identity. For the first time, you could feel uneasy and confused, that's why I base so much importance on your concentration and undivided attention. So that when you transform, you get familiar with your other form.

"Do NOT panic, if you see that you are surrounded by some animals and the fact that you can't transform. Your first transformation is so tiring and self-consuming that even if you transform into a lion or a

dragon for that matter, you wouldn't feel hungry or compelled to eat your fellow students."

Many of them gulped in panic but stood their ground. The class first practiced the incantation without their wands and then started concentrating in shutting every sound and thought from their mind so that they could get in touch with their inner dormant creature, if it existed. In that state, they were to incant the '*Transfiguration Spell*' and wait for the transformation to begin.

Harry wasn't very sure that he would be able to transform or not. He had never thought of the fact and he dreaded his Animagi form, before even transforming. *I hope it's a stag*, he pleaded with his inner self.

Hermione and Ron weren't feeling so confident either, as Harry noticed for the first time, how worried Hermione looked that her hands were almost shaking. When she caught him looking at her, she mouthed, "What if I can't transform?" She looked devastated.

Ron on other hand had his eyes closed tight shut and was muttering: "Just don't be a weasel, *not* a weasel!"

Tension gripped him as he concentrated in closing every sound and thought, which wasn't difficult, as he had almost mastered Occlumency. With beating heart and slippery hands from perspiration, he started concentrating hard; closing his mind to all the encroaching sounds, thoughts, fear ... until there was nothing left except a part of himself he had never seen or felt before; an unexplored dormant part of him, which had always been there but hadn't been accessed before. He felt himself ready for the transformation as he repeated the incantation with the wand movement.

He felt his body starting to change as his limbs started displacing themselves in a series of movements, a searing pain shot through his scar as the transformation continued and took new turns. He wanted to scream but nothing came out as he forced his eyes tight shut, so that he couldn't see his out of proportioned body.

He felt himself stretch to the limits as every sense of his body was disarrayed. His head pounded, fit to burst as he had a flash of the

smoky snake from his dreams. It came gliding towards him with such a force that on impact everything went blank.

As rushing wind, his senses returned. He heard screaming, as he somehow hurtled towards McGonagall fiercely. His vision bleared as he coiled himself around her.

*What's happening? ... What am I doing?*

A steely talon pierced him somewhere, as he hissed at the cat-form of McGonagall.

*No! This is not me! ... Leave me alone! ... Get out... GET OUT... GET OUT!* he screamed from somewhere dormant, which took all of his energy away. His scar throbbed painfully making him sway and his vision to blur again. His head filled with thousand screams, magnified.

*So, is this how people die?*

He squirmed in agony but faltered as a new voice joined the screams, overcoming their fierceness and he heard tinkling bells and someone humming:

***Let those who rest more deeply sleep,  
Let those awake their vigils keep...***

*I know that voice! I recognize it now!*

Something uncoiled inside him as his head split open with a piercing scream.

The last thing that he remembered before losing conscience was a hazy form of a bird taking flight.

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He could hear his own heartbeat inside his head. A strong beat of ... *dhuk... DHUK... dhuk... DHUK...*

Everything was in a blur as he tried to feel some inkling of wakefulness. It was then, when he felt himself moving. Short

footsteps echoed in the dark surroundings, as he ambled towards an unknown destination.

*"Lumos!"*

It was not him speaking but the voice from his dreams... the voice he yearned to hear... the voice of his mother... coming from his own mouth. He was looking at a new world... his mother's world... from her own very eyes. Harry experienced a feeling of weightlessness, as he felt himself somehow in the body of his mother, looking, feeling, sensing whatever she was experiencing.

Her figure faltered as she lifted her wand-hand up to see beyond the beam of light, trying to listen to some inaudible sound.

"Who's there?" she asked firmly.

Someone sighed, and something flickered in front of her. Through the fabric of darkness a tall figure with muddled hair and readied smile emerged.

"James!" Lily exclaimed exasperatedly.

"Er... Hi!" James grinned, stowing away his invisibility cloak inside his robes.

"How many times do I have to tell you, not to follow me everywhere?" she said shaking her head. "I can take care of myself, you know."

"Honey, but I was worried sick." James swayed on the spot clutching his forehead, while Lily rolled her eyes.

"I wasn't going to wrestle a troll that I needed your help," she said huffily.

"Aaargh!" James clutched at his heart as he pretended to be wounded by her words.

"Oh, James!" she punched him playfully.

"I was just worried. You shouldn't be running to your little escapades now that-"

She silenced him by putting her hand on his mouth. "I am not sick, so don't worry. Everything will be all right. I can almost feel it," she said smiling at the crook of his neck, while James kissed her forehead affectionately.

"Let's get out of here, shall we?" he said guiding her.

They walked towards a bright room, which turned out to be a well-lit entrance with flame torches, dwarfed by a towering gate, which was slightly ajar.

Shapes of different creatures glimmered on the door as they seemed to dance with the flickering light of the torches. Lily stopped beside it and extended her hand to touch the cold surface of the gate, running her hands on the ancient scripture surrounding every creature. She stroked the contours of a dragon, Unicorn, clawed fish, and Chimaera with her fingers, faltering near the giant snake whose fanged mouth was bared, while its eyes mockingly gleamed with the flames.

Lily gave an involuntary shudder. James placed his hands on her shoulders and gently pushed her outside the doorway, which closed by itself with a big thud, causing flight of many colorful birds from the nearby trees. A vast countryside and soft breeze welcomed them outside, which was decorated with knee-length grass, glowing orange trees and flowerbeds, which were scattered all over the place, crowned by a pink sky with an orange halo.

"Still haven't gotten over it?" James asked.

"I don't know, James. I still have a very bad feeling about it," Lily sighed and stared at the orange halo; the strewn remnant of the Sun of this world.

"Well, don't worry too much," James said indifferently but his concerned expression betrayed his words. He turned away and with a series of wand movements opened a Gateway.

"Let's get you ready for the travel," James said turning towards Lily, when a piercing inhuman shriek rang through. Harry's vision bleared with rainbow colors as his scar prickled like it was being stoked up with fire-seeds. He rushed to his own world calling after his parents, "DON'T GO!" and opening his eyes to a bleary room.

"He's awake! Someone, call Madam Pomfrey."

"Call Dumbledore."

"Bring him his glasses."

"Is he all right?"

"Will you all just relax?" Lupin's voice boomed and silenced everyone.

Harry swept his sweat-drenched face with his sleeve. Two pillows were set against his back as soon as he lifted himself gingerly on the bed by Lupin, while Ron put his glasses on.

Ron, Hermione and Lupin stared at him, waiting for him to speak.

"Er..." He stared back at their long and weary faces and remembered his transformation and the dream-vision after.

"Are you feeling all right, Harry?" Lupin asked concernedly.

"Never been better." He tried the James grin but failed miserably as the trio became more worried by his words.

"What did I do? Is McGonagall all right?" he blurted out the most pressing matter first.

They exchanged looks as Ginny came rushing in, with Madam Pomfrey. The Matron checked his pulse and waved her wand three times in front of him as her wand gave out greenish bubbles.

"Well, he seems to be all right, but I would like to keep him for the night," Madam Pomfrey said in a just-in-case voice.

"Fifteen minutes," she said pointing to the grandfather clock and made for her office.



"So, now can somebody tell me, what actually happened?" Harry inquired.

"Were you dreaming? Or was it another-"

Ron hurriedly cut off Hermione, "Well... you transformed into a giant snake, that's what happened," Ron changed tracks receiving the angry glares from others.

Hermione swiftly covered the awkward pause. "Um... well, you gave me a quite a bit of fright when I opened my eyes to check on you; an oversized snake, slithering drunkenly beside me."

"But he wasn't doing anything!" Ron said defensively.

"Yes, he wasn't." Hermione continued while staring at Harry's feet, "But suddenly you just came to life, like coming out of a coma or something and lunged at Professor McGonagall and then... I- I didn't realize what I was doing when-"

"You scuffed him!" Ron said angrily.

"I didn't realize that I had transformed!" Hermione said exasperatedly.

"You could have hurt him!" Ron went on.

"He could have killed Professor McGonagall!" Hermione retorted back.

She gasped and put her hands over her mouth as if she had let loose a swear word. She realized that their little scuffle had blown out of proportion. Ron, Ginny and Lupin stared at Harry for a reaction but didn't get any.

"Is she all right?" Harry said worriedly ignoring Hermione's words.

"Yes, your fangs grazed her paw, good that she transformed swiftly. She has been mended and is resting in her room. Dumbledore would have been here but he was urgently needed in Romania," Lupin provided.

"Romania?"

"Seems like Voldemort is broadening his circle and is creating havoc there. He has taken us and the Ministry by surprise, as we've been only concentrating in the areas near London but now we have to expand our circle too," Lupin informed.

"I'm really sorry, Harry, I didn't mean to-" Hermione was cut off by Harry.

"No need to apologize, really. I should've had more control over my actions."

"But it wasn't you, Harry," Ron said eyeing him closely.

"It wasn't totally me but I was there, because I felt the transformation and *him*; Voldemort was inside of me. Maybe because all of my guards were down as I was fully concentrating on the transformation ... He was so happy... but then my mother came and saved me," he said with a smile.

"Say what?" inquired Ron, disbelievingly.

"Lily?" Lupin asked, scrunching his eyebrows.

Harry told them about the dreams he had been having since July, the changing colors and a familiar voice. How he had considered the voice all along to be familiar but couldn't rightly put his finger on it-he omitted the part, when he thought that he would die because his head would split from all the screaming-his mother's voice came to his rescue and blocked every encroaching sound, engulfing him in total peace.

"That's why, as soon as you coiled yourself around Professor McGonagall, you flinched like you were electrocuted or something and uncoiled yourself with the same speed," Ron wondered loudly.

"You fainted after that and for few minutes we were in a fix because you weren't breathing, like you were being asphyxiated," said Hermione.

"I don't know myself, what actually happened after that. When I came to, I was at an unfamiliar place... So, you were the bird?" Harry enquired curiously.

"Yes, an eagle." Hermione smiled nervously.

"I tried to stop you but didn't realized what I was doing till I pierced you and panicked and took flight-"

"And transformed in midair." Ron cackled, while Hermione gave him an injured look. "Lucky, there were all those cushions." Ron grinned while all of them tried to smile.

"An unfamiliar place?" Lupin said curiously, repeating Harry's words.

He told them about his vision of another world, his parents and the magnanimous Gate.

"You saw it all through Lily's eyes?" Lupin asked disbelievingly.

"Yes, my mother's eyes."

"She touched the giant snake on the gate and flinched. Did she know about me then?" he asked Lupin.

"I don't think so, Harry. It must have reminded her of Voldemort. You should tell Dumbledore everything in detail. Maybe he knows about this place."

"Have you been to another world, Lupin?" Harry asked Lupin.

"No I haven't, but your parents and Sirius have, numerous times," Lupin said gravely.

"Did you see where she was coming from?" Ginny spoke for the first time.

"No, it was all dark." Harry noticed Ginny for the first time after coming to-there were dark circles around her eyes, like she hadn't slept for days.

"A broken sun did you say?" Lupin inquired.

"Yes, that's what my mother thought when she saw it and there were golden trees-"

"And colorful birds," Ginny said slowly.

"Yes, I've already told you that," Harry said, staring at Ginny.

"Half an hour has passed." Madam Pomfrey did her time-check coming inside the ward, which his friends had dubbed the '*Potter-Ward*' because he somehow always found his way into it.

"We'll see you tomorrow then, mate," said Ron.

"Take care," said Hermione, pressing his right hand.

"Sleep well and practice Occlumency," Lupin advised in a whisper and waited for others to join him at the entrance.

Ginny simply stared at him for sometime with an expression like she wanted to say something, but deciding against it, turned away and made for the exit.

Harry stared after her for some time; he didn't know why but his heart was aching.

He sidled down on the bed but stopped midway when he felt pain shoot from his left calf. On close examination, he discovered an angry talon shaped bruise, which Madam Pomfrey had overlooked.

*This would always remind me of my first and last transformation... Professor McGonagall was right, Transfiguration is not everybody's cup of tea.*

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It was not long before Harry was freed from the Hospital, much to his relief, to amble about the great expanses of Hogwarts, not to mention the partial secret places where students kept on popping about; because of which a private moment, a lonesome stroll was hard to come by. The more Harry wanted to get away from the crowd, the more he became surrounded by students whispering along with their

furtive glances. It seemed to him that he was surrounded by an occult group chastising him day and night.

As usual, the news of his transformation into a giant snake, spread about faster than a pelting Firebolt. It was the new buzzword, the new source of Slytherins to publicly ridicule him, every chance they got. Malfoy, much to his joy had ceremoniously taught all the Slytherins, young and old, to corner him everywhere they see fit.

The remaining houses were not speaking up so loudly but they were afraid of him, all the same. Gryffindors didn't much care, as they were getting used to such circumstances every year but the first-years were still young, therefore, prone to all the rumors and dawdled wherever they saw him.

It had become quite usual to hear Slytherins shouting on the top of their voices, balderdash like:

"Hey, Potter! Nice sleeks."

"Potter! Want to convert?"

"Potter! Can I see your fangs?"

"Are you sure, you are not Slytherin himself or the Dark Lord's son?"

"Do you suck blood too?"

Peeves's bawdy poetry was modified and many versions were droned on and on by all the Slytherins endlessly.

*"Oh Potter you rotter, Oh, what have you done?  
You're slinking off teachers now; you think it's good fun?"*

*"Here goes a Potty,  
Whose head is so clotty,  
That he thinks he's a hotty,  
When he's really a dotty."*

It was his second-year all over again except with a perverse twist. As the doubts of him becoming the next Dark Lord became apparent and

the qualms of him destroying the wizarding community and Hogwarts were discussed by all and sundry.

Hermione repeated her 'ignore them' mantra over and over again, using her prefect powers to shove off students from their path. Ron offered now and then to hex every other student who kept on bursting by.

But Harry on the other hand was almost detached from his surrounding, in the whirlpool of his own mind. He didn't even notice Malfoy saying lewd words behind his back, Snape remarking on his smallest of mistakes as if he had made the blunder of his life, frightened students clearing his path, Ron and Hermione bickering in their usual manner, and a very tired Ginny.

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The first instance that he got, he made for Professor McGonagall's office. With a beating heart, drumming abnormally against his chest, he entered her office. She was seated comfortably on her desk, reading a foot long parchment. She noticed him before he could present a normal posture.

"Potter, are you all right?" she asked worriedly, taking off her reading glasses and examining him closely.

"I should ask you the same question, Professor McGonagall," he replied sheepishly. "I am very sorry, Professor, I never intended-"

"I thought you were intelligent enough to disregard such diminutive circumstances," she replied looking astounded, cutting him in between his long monologue that he had carefully rehearsed for her. She looked him straight in the eye for awhile and then smiled amusingly.

"When I took that class, I knew I was taking a big risk, as Dumbledore had pointed out to me earlier. However, I wanted to make sure, so that no more surprises were left out, to put it mildly. As we know, there is still so much undiscovered strength and power in you," she said, looking at him directly.

"Did you know that I would transform into a snake?" Harry asked, streaking past the word 'giant'.

"No, I didn't know as I'm no Seer," she replied waving her hand, like she was warding off an unusually annoying fly. "However, I was ready for something unexpected and that certainly did happen when you transformed into a Python."

"I have decided not to become an Animagus, Professor," he said, bowing his head.

She started thoughtfully, "I can understand. It's totally up to you... If I were you, Potter, I would be more concerned about getting my advanced training. Now that you know what lies in your future... If you haven't noticed, Potter, in your being injured and all the uncanny situations that you land in, you always come through. And I know that you have borne not only physical scars but wounds deep down that we can't see. However, you have the potential of becoming a great wizard, so just get yourself ready."

Harry didn't know what to say, it was like someone had turned on a bright bulb inside his head.

"So, just pay no heed to all those who mock you. As I specifically don't want any brawl to break out when Dumbledore's away," she reasoned matter-of-factly, dismissing him obliquely by putting her glasses on and returning to her foot long parchment.

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## - CHAPTER 19 - Down Memory Lane -

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"What is happening in Romania?" Harry blurted the moment he entered the Room of Requirement.

"Hello to you too!" Lupin exclaimed. "I thought you were not going to show up."

"Just got delayed on the way," Harry replied distractedly.

"Oh, the deranged crowd! I should have guessed," Lupin said, amused.

"Well, back to your first, the Ministry of Romania has been infiltrated somehow. The Death Eaters have been using Imperius Curse on many important officials. We weren't looking for infiltrations but people to induct into the Order. Therefore, we were hoodwinked, but not for long, and that's why as soon as our contacts found that out, Dumbledore was called upon urgently to sort things out."

"He is good at that." Harry grinned.

"Yes he is." Lupin smiled. "But now everything known to Romania is also known to Voldemort; from secret headquarters to the so-called escaped Death Eaters who begged for forgiveness after his fall. The Obliviator Squad had to do double shifts on the officials, but so many memories were modified that some cases were given up entirely and sent to St. Mungo's," he finished sadly.

"But, why Romania? What was there?" Harry asked, puzzled.

"I don't know about that, come to think of it... But then, Voldemort has his reasons, *always*..." Lupin said trying to control a snarl. "And it's not very cheery to know that Voldemort is gobbling up all kinds of information throughout the world," Lupin finished scratching his chin.

"I reckon, he's looking for something," Harry thoughtfully provided.

"Yes, because we found a small hoard of Death Eaters visiting Egypt and Italy, trying to repeat their folly, but we got there before they couldn't manage any further damage."



Harry raked his brains; numerous thoughts were making clattering noises inside his head, to his irritation. "It still feels a little weird, getting all the information. I'm not very used to it, really." After a pause he continued, "If you could have just told me last year."

"Harry, we can't go back in time, can we?" Lupin interrupted him desolately.

Harry's pupils dilated in excitement, while Lupin interrupted again. "Don't get ideas! You know it can't be undone. We always hope in life that we could have done things differently if we were given a second chance BUT we aren't. Things weren't revealed to you then for a reason, and now there is another. So just get on, Harry. Don't dwell in things you know you can't get out of."

Lupin's words struck a chord in his chest, but along with it something else came. "But, Lupin, I have to dwell in the past to reveal my future!" he added excitedly to a nonplussed Lupin. "You see, maybe he is looking for the gateway!" Harry said wide-eyed, comprehension dawning on him.

"What? Do you mean that he's trying to get into the-"

"-world I saw in my dream... er... vision," Harry completed Lupin's sentence, much to his amazement.

"This is the missing link, isn't it?" Harry said reflectively, his heart soaring with a purpose. Then it did a double flip and went down again. He suddenly felt very guilty for not sharing all this and more with his best of friends: Ron and Hermione.

"Maybe this is why Dumbledore is taking so long in Romania, checking up on everything to be sure. He has never left Hogwarts' premises for such a long time," Lupin pondered on loudly, breaking Harry's chain of thoughts.

"I reckon I need a break, Remus," Harry said, opening his bag and taking out Sirius's diary.

"Oh that..." Lupin stared at the diary longingly.

Harry took out his wand absentmindedly, noticing Lupin's sad expression.

"I guess this is yours." Lupin hunkered down and picked up the orangish orb that Dumbledore had given him on his birthday, which had slid from his pocket unobserved, in the process of him taking out his wand.

"Take care of it," Lupin warned and streaked out of the room without uttering another word.

Harry gazed at the retreating figure of Lupin, which was somewhat hunched, or was he imagining it?

He sighed and in turn looked at the miniature orb, which he had dubbed, 'Fireball' fondly, because of its color.

"Not your time, I guess," said Harry, returning it to his inside pocket and worked the diary with its password.

It had been months since, he last opened it. He mused over the unusual friendship of Marauders and what remained left of it.

*I hope Wormtail dies,* a venomous thought clutched at his heart as he gripped the diary tightly.

*Get a grip, mate!* Ron's voice echoed inside his head.

*Focus, Harry...* It was Dumbledore, soothing all worries from his mind.

*Yes! Focus... Let's get on with it. Hmm... A date well past Hogwarts... Sometime before I was born... Sirius, how did you live? What did you do? ...* Harry pondered on in his mind, leafing through his godfather's memorabilia. As he went further and deeper in the diary, the writing changed and became more joined and slightly tilted to the right side. Marauders kept on popping after every few paragraphs.

A heading caught his attention, dated: **14th April 1979, "The First Assignment."**

He didn't want to wait and see where he would land. Therefore, he reflexively tapped his wand on the page and waited for the room to dissolve into an unknown destination. The slightly darker walls of Room of Requirement expanded outwards and disappeared into nothingness. The torches blazing vanished into a luminous square room, having thick walls, resembling the Dungeon walls at Hogwarts. The room was empty except for four stone gargoyles possessing ruby eyes, which somehow seemed alive and glittered along the burning flames in their mouths.

Harry watched, his mouth agape, as the three figures he yearned to be with entered the area, whispering to each other.

Along with Sirius, James and Lily were treading softly towards the room. They were much older than the obnoxious teenagers, he remembered from Dumbledore's Pensieve, from a memory, which had disturbed him more than he liked. They more resembled the time when the wedding photograph of his parents was taken. Lily's voice brought him back from his reverie.

"Do you think it's wise?" Lily said incredulously.

"Got any other bright idea?" Sirius cocked an eyebrow.

"Keep your voices down!" James whispered in alarm, which quieted the other two.

Lily whispered a spell, which made her wand-tip glow red. She placed her index finger on her lips to silence her accomplices, while waving her wand at the sides of the nearest gargoyle. James and Sirius followed suit, as they too crouched low and made for other two gargoyles, their wands alight red.

The moment they repeated Lily's moves, a white laser-like beam shot between the three gargoyles, so that they were engulfed by a white triangle. Harry was in between one of the beams and moved away reflexively.

Lily signaled to them, shaking her head furiously, while the other two exchanged grins. Sirius brought out a very familiar mirror from inside his robes, simultaneously holding his wand aloft through which the

white beam was passing. He placed the mirror in front of the beam skillfully. The mirror became transparent and the beam went past it, undisturbed. He then elongated his wand with a spell, so that it reached the fourth gargoyle. It also emitted a white beam of light, so that the trio became surrounded by a white square with two additional beams crisscrossing each other in the middle.

They moved away from the beams instinctively, looking at each other questioningly, waiting for a response. The beam pulsed three times and as brightly as they had emerged, they went out in a flick and turned the gargoyles' eyes emerald.

"Phew!" James sighed, Sirius and Lily followed suit.

"I thought we were done for," Lily said wiping her brow.

"You and your optimism." Sirius rolled his eyes, while James masked his chuckle in a cough, being faced with another pair of angry emerald eyes.

"I wish Moony were here, or Wormtail for that matter," Sirius mustered in a genuine aching voice, for distraction.

"Yeah, but still you managed," James said appreciatively.

"I must admit-" Lily faltered as the floor shuddered beneath their feet. They only had a moment to look shocked, as the floor gave away ominously like a dragon's hatching egg, and they were left at the mercy of thin air.

Harry screamed along James, Lily and Sirius, knowing too well that he couldn't be heard, but continued nevertheless. Harry's heart pounded against his chest, as he waited for an impact or something similar. He wasn't able to see anything because of the dense mist that surrounded them, the rushing wind howled against his ears.

"Do something!" Sirius shouted above the shrieking wind.

"Wish I had my broomstick!" James howled.

"Oh, I can't conjure parachutes!" Lily whined.

"What kind of a witch are you?" Sirius asked incredulously.

"What kind of a w-"

"Lily, I'm so sorry for bringing you along," James cut in between.

"Don't be silly, James."

"And as the time is near-I was serious when I proposed to you last week."

Harry could hear Sirius groaning somewhere.

"You wha-"

Sirius cut Lily in between. "Let me be a Minister and marry you two off on the twist, shall I?" Sirius yelled exasperatedly.

"We are falling, for crying out loud, and you lovebirds can't stop sno-" Sirius's plea to the heavens, was interrupted by a shout.

*"Plumalio!"* Lily bellowed.

The trio in the nick of time, plopped down on a featherbed, conjured by Lily.

"That was brilliant, Lily," James said quite breathlessly, hoisting himself up from a tangle of robes, shoving off Sirius's leg, which was threatening to kick him in the shins.

Lily on the other hand was buried under the curtain of her hair and robes. James helped her to her feet, while she swept her long tresses out of her face, with long swipes. If it weren't for the whole mysterious location, Harry would have burst into gales of laughter, but still couldn't help the few chuckles that escaped him nervously, as his subconscious was in a conflict that his parents were indeed there, in his time; not vice versa.

"It was nothing, really," Lily said with as much dignity as was possible in her disheveled condition. James grinned and in turn messed up his own hair idly.

Harry looked about him in the darkness, the only source of light being the three wand tips held up by Lily, James and Sirius. The surrounding was unshapely and curbed, seemed more like a cave.

"*Point Me!*" James uttered, holding his wand aloft in his hand. The wand rotated first clockwise and then counter-clockwise and back again.

"It's no use!" Sirius said in a frustrated voice.

"Where in Merlin's sake, are we?"

"Deep, deep down, is all I can tell you," Lily said, squatting at a corner examining a rock.

"*Reducto!*" James experimented with a corner. The spell didn't reveal a way but few rocks crumbled out of that place.

"Let's do it together?" James suggested and they did. On their third attempt, some rocks fell away and revealed something shiny. On close examination and scraping, it turned out to be an egg-shaped jewel.

"Well, what are you waiting for? Pull it out or something," Sirius demanded, while Lily and James exchanged doubtful looks.

"It could be anything," Lily said hesitantly.

"But nothing would happen, if we sit here tight and suffocate to death," Sirius said, flinging his arms about.

"Padfoot, you are such a ray of sunshine!" James exclaimed and holding Lily's hand, jabbed at the pale jewel.

The jewel lighted with his touch and the unshapely rocks and earth, shifted away to reveal an oval shaped door beside the jewel.

"Not too difficult, was it?" Sirius half-smirked, half-gaped at the following scene.

The entry led to a stretched corridor which was guarded by a row of statues of lions and gargoyles, alternatively. A distant door was enticingly blinking at them at the end.

"Is it what I think it is?" Sirius asked, his mouth still sagging.

"Yes, I think so." James gulped.

"And you *do* know about the legend?" Lily asked in a whisper.

"What legend?" Sirius and James both bellowed in unison.

"Haven't you read the confidential files that you were supposed to memorize by our next training session?"

"No!" they both uttered exasperatedly – the brotherhood continuing its toil. Lily sighed and rolled her eyes, muttering something which sounded like, "*Boys!*"

Before anyone could say another word, an inhuman shriek came reverberating through the gargantuan depths of the corridor.

"I reckon we have company," James said, taking out his wand, his features metamorphosing every trace of humor into solemnity and determination.

Sirius's eyes glimmered in excitement. He gracefully covered the short distance from where he was standing to the oval shaped doorway so stealthily that none of them were able to notice till he had reached the exit.

Lily on the other hand had her eyes closed and was mumbling something under her breath as though recalling something forgotten.

There was a torrent of footsteps, as the darkness between the lion and gargoyle statues-that they presumed to be adjoining walls-gave away to faint flickering lights. There seemed to be a region much bigger than the gaping corridor between the shadows of the guarding statues, illuminated by the haphazard brightness.

"Cloak to the rescue, James. I think covertness would be much appreciated," Sirius provided.

"But I don't have it," James said almost inaudibly.

"WHAT!"

"Shhh!" Lily warned.

*"But why?"*

"We were supposed to be doing field research, not entering some rampant duel," James said exasperatedly.

"But you never know!"

"I think someone is spending too much time with *Moody*," James jeered at Sirius.

"And I think-"

"Oh, shut up, both of you!" Lily whispered lividly.

"We can't always have everything! So, before we blow our cover, I'd like you two to be completely mute," she finished in a try-otherwise-and-you'll-regret-it-later voice.

Sirius looked as if, he would love to spill out what was going through his mind but remained silent after receiving threatening glares from James.

"Let's have a better view, shall we?" James whispered and they edged closer to the lights, shielding themselves, behind the mammoth statues.

As Harry could chance a better view, he strolled towards the lights and was not surprised to see a hoard of hooded Death Eaters looming towards the corridor from the vast expanses of darkness of the region beyond. Half of them were carrying flaming torches and the others were using their wands to illuminate their path. The



inhuman screech, which sounded somewhat familiar to Harry, rang again, from somewhere close to where he was standing.

The hooded figures quickened their pace, as the sound of a powerful, lithe body was added with the ominous screech of the unknown creature. Something huge was on their tails, possessing blazing eyes which followed them unblinkingly.

The Death Eaters spread around to distract the beast, which was suddenly illuminated by the torches and wands of the dispersing Death Eaters.

A fully-grown Griffin was regally charging at them, its variegated coat shining along with the enchanting fires of its eyes. It mercilessly swooped down on the fleeing Death Eaters, injuring and killing them with a single snap of its steely beak. The vast expanses of that unknown territory were soon filled with the echoes of pained screams along with the territorial roars of the Griffin.

Harry was so busy observing the Griffin that he didn't notice the trio stealing past him in their surreptitious expedition to the glowing doorway at the end of the corridor. Running Death Eaters kept blocking his vision, but before long, he was following the trio too.

A sudden flare of red sparks attracted Harry's attention. One of the Death Eaters had launched an ungainly attack on the Griffin, scorching some of its coat-feathers, and in an instant, with a single slash of the Griffin's paw, was lying face down in the pool of his own blood.

In the frenzy, nobody noticed the three stealthy figures edging closer and closer to the doorway. The trio in turn was unaware of the haphazard group forming of the Death Eaters behind their backs to slay the Griffin.

A howling scream issued from none other than the rampaging Griffin, stopping the trio on their tracks. The ground shook beneath their feet and dust spilled from above, as if the structure itself were moaning with the troubled Griffin. They rounded back on the scene to glimpse a circle of Death Eaters, shooting Stunning Spells and Crutiatius Curses to impede the beast.

"They are hurting him!" Lily said angrily.

"We can't do anything. If we do, our cover is blown," Sirius said in an explanatory voice.

Another screech sounded, the Death Eaters were closing in on the Griffin and were apparently gaining.

"But we have to do something! We must! We can't leave like this," Lily pleaded.

"Lily, come to your senses, we are getting all clear without the Guardian breathing down our necks. What more can one expect?" Sirius said incredulously.

"I don't know, but I just can't!" Lily said resolutely and headed towards the Death Eaters, without even a backward glance, wand ready for onslaught. James and Sirius followed suit, James ambled straight with the air of unwavering support, while Sirius just sulked along dejectedly.

Lily shot Stunning Spells as soon as they were in range, successfully distracting half of the Death Eaters. The Griffin seeing its chance, snapped at the nearest Death Eaters, killing them instantly.

"Get away, this is not your place," a Death Eater commanded the trio, but wasn't fast enough to save his wand from shooting out of his hand and landing in Sirius's grasp. But before any of them could capture him, he broke a smoky vial at his feet, which issued a gush of black smoke, engulfing them rapidly and blindly.

"Stop, stop!"

James cleared the mist with a flick of his wand. They were almost alone, except the Griffin which was drunkenly following the last escaping Death Eaters.

"You two, maintain a lookout. I'll be just back with the *Ventusus Scroll*," Sirius ran towards the bright doorway, without waiting for a reply.

The Griffin hobbled back towards them, the fire of its eyes diminishing with every step. A muffled gurgling sound was coming from its mouth, as its head doled from side to side. But, still with extreme determination, it charged at James and Lily.

They ran in opposite directions to avoid the hulking beast, the Griffin swerved and ran after Lily instead. Harry too followed and anxiously wished for a miracle to happen.

"I don't want to hurt you, please!" Lily implored to the beast, as if to make it understand, still running from it, her wand alight and hair flying everywhere.

Harry could see James veering towards the beast as well.

"James, no!" Lily bellowed as she saw him approaching the beast, his wand pointing towards it. The beast stopped on its tracks hearing Lily's bellow.

James looked nonplussed as he unsurely stole glances from the beast to Lily. She in turn, started nearing the beast, who just gazed at her with its fiery eyes.

"We do not want to hurt you," she said softly.

The beast was almost eight feet tall, and it had to bow its head to be on par with Lily.

She inched closer seeing it becoming docile.

"Lily-" James whispered worriedly, but was silenced by her held-up hand.

On a closer look she saw the reason behind the Griffin's waning strength. A huge splinter of a torch flame had pierced one of its forelegs, caking the wound with dry blood, and due to its variegated coat, it was only visible, up-close.

"Oh dear!" Lily gasped and edged closer. The Griffin didn't seem to mind.

She poked around the wound to check how deep the splinter had gone. Harry could guess that it was almost six inches deep and two inch wide, the Griffin must have incredible strength to bear such searing pain.

James kept his distance, because whenever he tried edging closer, the Griffin became fidgety.

Harry was intently watching Lily when the thought of Sirius flittered through his mind ... *The Scroll!* he thought. The moment he about-turned to check on him, he saw him ambling towards them clutching a slightly elongated sack. James warned him from the distance that he shouldn't come any closer.

Harry snapped towards the Griffin, hearing a restrained sound issue from it, while Lily used a spell to extricate the long splinter of wood. She was performing some nifty spells that Harry didn't even have inkling of. With some more swishes of her wand, the Griffin became free from all injuries.

Lily faltered as she looked straight into the deep blazing eyes of the beast. Harry noticed that the fire of the Griffin's eyes ceased to be menacing, but had somehow changed into calming warmth.

The Griffin bowed its head slowly, and for a moment Harry thought that the beast would do something unexplainably horrible, remembering its attack on the Death Eaters. James too must have been thinking along the same lines as he readied his wand towards the beast, but the Griffin with greatest care, patted Lily's head gently with its beak.

All of them sighed in relief, on the sudden appearance of graciousness from the beast. They were in no position to do anything otherwise.

The Griffin nudged Lily with a soft push of its beak, towards the door of the main chamber, from where Sirius had just extracted the scroll. She shot a panic-stricken look at James who didn't have any bright ideas either. The Griffin opened its wings as if, trying to stretch its' muscles along the walk. But their straight journey was disrupted as it veered towards the rows of columns, where Sirius was hiding.

"Uh oh!" James mumbled.

"Sirius, take cover!" James spoke to the communicating mirror, which Harry instantly recognized. Harry reckoned that the Griffin already knew the presence of another human and the fact that he possessed something which it guarded.

The Griffin screeched territorially, telling them that it knew more than they thought it did, halting just in front of the column hiding Sirius.

"It's too late, we can't run," Harry heard Sirius's dejected voice through the mirror James was clutching. He emerged in front of them, side-stepping the column.

There was a moment when Harry was certain that the Griffin was intending to swoop down with its steely beak and end the lives of those he dearly loved but then again there was a part of him, which kept on telling him that they survived and there was no alternate reality to it.

The Griffin unfurled its wings and beat them about causing the age-old dust covering the expanses to scatter everywhere. It screeched again animatedly as if trying to convey some message. It bowed its head to be at Lily's eye-level, extending its right claw towards her and clucking in its throat, producing a muffled tick-tock sound.

"You want me to take it?" Lily said questioningly, doubt creasing her forehead. The Griffin clucked in response waving its claw in air.

"But I can't! I don't want it," Lily said shaking her head, while Griffin looked enquiringly at her.

James and Sirius exchanged looks and shrugged. Like Harry, they weren't getting the strange communication either.

The Griffin looked at the bulging robes of Sirius as if seeing through it. Sirius flinched in response, but stood his grounds.

Reading between the lines, Lily said, "We will never use it for power. We'll keep it more than safe..."

The Griffin beat its wings again and observed them all one by one, making its final decision.

At last, it came near Lily and twittered softly in her ear, like imparting the world's biggest secret. After the short exchange, it grunted in James's and Sirius's direction and bowed to embrace Lily, lightly resting its head on her shoulder, stroking her hair with its head in small sweeping motions. Its wings unfurled to cover her completely and there she remained for awhile, closing her eyes lost in the wings of a mystic creature. James worriedly reared to rush towards her, afraid of losing her, but was held back by Sirius.

It was a strange sight, seeing a vicious beast embracing a human with such love and devotion. Its wings concealed Lily from the rest of the world, like it was saving a part of her behind with itself.

The Griffin parted its wings to release Lily from its folds and beat them to produce a whirling current around them. All of them covered their eyes to deflect the flying dust about them. Everything went white as Harry felt a strange sensation in his navel like a plug being pulled, similar to traveling by Portkey but more like a lift-off.

With the sound of a faint Griffin screech, they stumbled on solid grounds again. They were back in the Gargoyle Room and the floor was intact as if it had never given away to nothingness, as Harry remembered. The only exception was the four gargoyle statues, which didn't seem to be alive anymore. Their blazing mouths and eyes were empty and dark; their formidability all gone.

James rushed towards Lily, who was brushing her robes ceremoniously.

"Are you all right!" James asked concernedly.

"Hmm... what?" she mumbled, looking up. Seeing James however, tended her to focus as she looked at him strangely and stole glances around them.

"Lily, is everything okay?" James asked, examining her closely for any injuries or such.

"I'm fine, James... I was just overcome... Really, there's nothing to worry about," she said soothingly, giving them reassuring glances.

"And I thought we were done for," Sirius broke the silence by enacting a girlish voice.

In spite of herself Lily grinned genuinely, waving a fist at Sirius, who grinned back and looked more than relieved to see things back to normal. Harry in turn just wondered about the Sirius in front of him. The escaped prisoner from Azkaban was a mere shadow of this Sirius, who was the bottom-line master, a person who would do anything for his friends... *Like, giving his life?*

Harry sighed, closing his eyes to the memories which had almost overwhelmed him. They were exhilarating but painful at the same time.

He opened his eyes to the sound of his father.

"Do you still have it?" James asked. Sirius fished inside his robes and with a contented smile took out the Scroll.

"Yes!"

"Lily, you did it!" James hugged Lily, without seeing that she was buried in some deep thought.

"Yes, those Healer classes paid off," Lily said, smiling at James, while Sirius examined the ancient looking scroll. It was written in some unintelligible language and its crispiness told that it was managed by very few hands.

Harry in turn, just looked hungrily at the people he loved and lost, when he felt the tell-tale effects of the memory ending. He felt the ground giving away to something soft, like a hearthrug and the gloomy dark walls were replaced by the bright ones of the Room of Requirement. Try as he might to hold them back, the three figures vanished into the cruel sands of time.

-x.X.x-

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## - CHAPTER 20 - The Golden Wings -

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February flew by in rapid blurry motions, faces kept appearing and disappearing, reality and dreams went hand in hand.

Harry dissolved himself in studies, Quidditch and Advanced Training classes with Lupin so much that he didn't had time to relax or even have some fun. Ron and Hermione kept on dragging him out of his busy schedules and extra classes, telling him to take it easy but got no positive response, whatsoever.

In the absence of Dumbledore, McGonagall handled the school very well. Hogwarts ran without missing a beat and if anybody had any doubts in McGonagall's leadership, like certain Pure-blood families, they had to chew their own words, because in spite of her physical frailty, she was not only able to take her Transfiguration classes but fulfill the duties of the Headmistress as well.

Dumbledore was delayed further because of the side-trips to Egypt and Brazil. However, McGonagall informed them all that his return was imminent in mid-March.

Harry hadn't dared to use Sirius's diary again. It seemed that whenever he did, he became so over-whelmed with the memories that he lost his concentration in everything real.

Ron and Hermione had complied with his staring into space, fiddling with food and not listening to lectures but doodling on his parchment. However secretly, they planned of chucking the diary away for good, but knew too well that they were just over exaggerating the matter.

Hermione kept on grumbling to Ron, seeing Harry's distant eyes and his brooding state but was warned persistently that Harry didn't want another one of 'Hermione-lectures' to calm his nerves, and she did surrender, but grudgingly.

Harry was not the only one who had become distant. There was another Gryffindor who was acting almost exactly like him. There was no Fred and George Weasley, or Percy for that matter to notice that



Ginny had grown too much in her fifth-year. She was not an adolescent anymore, and a certain maturity had set upon her.

She didn't worry about trifle things anymore; she knew that she couldn't possibly please everybody-even herself. Moreover, she was getting less and less sleep and some doubts always circled in her mind. And when she did sleep, she saw strange shapes surrounding her...

She hid her feelings well with a smiling façade, warding off all the unwanted questions with the fact that she was just a little bit quieter than usual because of her up-coming O.W.Ls. She not only fooled her friends but her own brother; however, sometimes she did feel that Luna saw right through her charade of normalcy.

Ginny had discovered a beautiful friendship with Luna Lovegood and knew that above that spacey demeanor of hers, a very sensitive and sweet girl presided, who was just a little afraid of showing her real self to the world.

"Even in the darkest room, there is a ray of light!" Luna announced to no one in particular and flopped down beside Ginny in the Gryffindor table.

"What?" Ginny said, reluctantly coming out of her torpor and following Luna's gaze, which was resting on Harry.

He was doing the same thing he had been doing, since last month. Staring at nothing in particular and playing with his food. The current victim of Harry's sullenness was a piece of bacon, which was squished into peaces.

"Oh, Ronald, what's that?" Luna shrieked in excitement, snatching the Daily Prophet from his hand, causing the goblet near it drip all of its content into Harry's lap.

"What the-" Harry stood up and looked at his soaking-wet robes listlessly.

"I'll fix it," Hermione provided.

"Don't worry," Harry said idly, and waved his wand in a way that hot air issued from it, drying his robe. Hermione gaped at him but didn't say anything.

However, Harry didn't notice because he was busy staring at something else, entirely. There was a picture showing a tall man back-tracking a crowd from somewhere, the sweeping motion kept on repeating as the crowd dispersed. The picture was taken from such a distance that the man's face was completely concealed by shadows.

"Luna, can I see that?"

"Oh sure, I thought they at last found about heliopaths but the picture was of some stupid salamanders, showing off," she said in a disgruntled voice.

Harry took the Daily Prophet and straightened it to read, while the others peered beside him:

**-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-**

<b>Three</b>	<b>Muggles</b>	<b>Found</b>	<b>Dead!</b>
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**-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-**

*In a shocking turn of events, three Muggles were found dead near the temple of Ramses III in Thebes, the day before yesterday. The Muggle Police in Cairo thought that it was the work of some tomb-raiders, which is quite usual in that area, but after further investigations, it was revealed that nothing was stolen from any tomb nearby, as they searched over the whole Valley of the Queens.*

*Muggle Healers, called doctors, weren't able to explain the deaths; however, the Ministry of Magic today, released an official statement about these deaths.*

***"We have received concrete information that the three Muggles found dead near the temple of Ramses III were killed by the Killing Curse, classified as one of the Unforgivable Curses. The matter was mostly handled by the Muggle regulatory authority of Cairo. None of the Muggles killed have any relations with the magical world, therefore, the intent is debatable."***

*A Ministry official states that this turn of events lead to only one possibility. After the horrendous attacks by the Death Eaters on Platform Nine and Three-Quarters, the foreboding silence has been at last broken, proving that the Death Eaters are still at large.*

-X-X-

Hermione finished reading and exchanged worried glances around the group. All their heads swiveled towards Harry, whose face was setting in a grim expression. He was clutching the pumpkin-juice goblet, like he wanted to crush it into pieces.

Slowly Harry loosened his grip, coming out of his stupor.

"Ron, Ginny, Quidditch practice - go change," Harry ordered, the corners of his mouth barely moving because of his clenched jaws. He was out and about from the table in a second and without uttering another word, stalked off towards the common room.

"Hermione, did you check the History section?" Ginny asked, staring after the retreating figure of Harry, like others, fumbling for a new topic.

"Yes, couldn't find any mention of a Ventosus Scroll," she answered glumly.

*"Did you check the Restricted Section?"* Ginny whispered to her.

"Yes, that too..." Hermione said glumly.

"I could write to my dad," Luna provided.

Hermione glanced at her skeptically, "Er... Luna... um..."

"Yeah, why don't you send an owl? You can borrow Pig if you want," Ron provided helpfully, totally missing Hermione's reaction while she glared at him murderously.

"Thank you, Ronald!" Luna shrieked in delight, as if she was going to hug him, but she turned and sauntered towards the Ravenclaw table instead.

"Er..." Ron at last noticed Hermione's glare-but too late.

"I'm going to the Library." She stood up and banged her books on the table ceremoniously and followed Harry's anger-trail.

"What did I do?" Ron asked in total bewilderment.

Ginny sighed and debated the fact that should she lecture her own brother on girl-matters or not.

"Why are you so friendly with Luna, suddenly?" she asked, without answering his question.

"To shut her up, what else? Or she would have gone on and on about Fudge's secret heliopath army or Umbridge's teddy-bear club," Ron said, scrunching up his nose disgustedly, following his sister to the common room for their brooms.

Ginny laughed indulgently and shook her head. "Ron, grow up!" she said, while Ron still looked baffled.

"How many inches should I grow more to grow up?" Ron said looking down from his height of six feet.

"You are beyond help, brother," she said simply, patting his arm and made her way to the girl's dormitory.

-x-

Harry was out of his bed at daybreak. The dream had been the same again, even after practicing Occlumency, he kept on hearing his mother's voice but as always, wasn't able to see anything. He had predicted to himself that after seeing his mother in Sirius's memories, some kind of link may reappear like the one he had few months before, when he saw her going through a dark tunnel in a semi-dream-vision. However, nothing of that sort happened and he had to contend with more work and practices to keep his mind off of it.

He had been working hard in Quidditch practices, and following Wood's steps, he was scheduling three practices per week. Ginny had grumbled on his utter blindness to her O.W.L. studies but he

turned a deaf ear to her complaints, as the match against Ravenclaw drew nearer.

This particular match was crucial because Slytherin had already beaten Hufflepuff and Ravenclaw. Gryffindor needed another win to reach the finals, because the Slytherins were already leading.

The constraint happened in Hufflepuff/Ravenclaw match, when the game took almost ten hours to finish. Due to high winds, the Seekers were unable to see the Snitch but the Ravenclaw Chasers had plenty of time to score. Even when McGonagall had kittens about such a long match, it was finished according to the international Quidditch rules. That's why Ravenclaw was anxious to defeat Gryffindor to reach the finals, because while Ravenclaw lost against Slytherin, they lost by a very low margin of thirty points, so they still had the average margin over Gryffindor.

The pressure was building and the whole school was anticipating the match. Ravenclaws normally were on good terms with Gryffindors, but because of the match, they were keeping their distance and no more smiles were exchanged. While Hufflepuff sided along with Gryffindor, Slytherins just sauntered smugly around without any preference, causing discord as usual.

The tension was palpable when the Gryffindor team filed along the house tables in the Great Hall, their nerves on edge. Ron looked green with worry and Seamus looked ready to drown in the nearest goblet-even Jack and Andrew were behaving themselves, the shoveling-ceremony all but forgotten.

Katie and Harry had been emphasizing on the Beater capabilities in them and were successful in prizing an uncanny talent – the *Bludger Backbeat* feat. It was an open secret that they were not very good with their clubs when it came to swinging the Bludgers forward but they were somehow successfully able to send the Bludgers flying backwards very accurately. Ron attributed it to their backward minds but, nonetheless, Harry was proud on his Beaters, who hadn't sent a single Bludger towards their own team-mates since last three practices, which was a feat, considering their previous record.

He wasn't too worried, except for the fact that he was going to play against Cho after almost two years. He knew it in his heart that he didn't have any feelings for her; however, he was aware of the fact that he couldn't stop looking at her when she did pass him by.

Harry shook his head furiously, as if trying to shake those thoughts out of his mind.

"Harry, calm down," Hermione said, clearing the spilled juice from his goblet on the table.

"Yeah," he answered, distractedly looking at the Ravenclaw table, receiving a very charming smile from Cho.

"I think I'm going to be sick," Harry said under his breath bowing his head low, while gripping it between his hands, like it would come off if he let go.

-X-

"An excellent day for such an important Quidditch match! Welcome to the second to last match of the season. Put your hands together for Gryffindor and Ravenclaw," Dean Thomas announced in a spirited voice.

As the audience clapped around, Dean continued, "I give you the Ravenclaw team: Boot... Buchanan... McLain... Davies... Bradley... Chambers and... Chang.

"And I give you the Gryffindor team: Bell... Weasley... Finnigan... Weasley... Sloper... Kirke and... Potter!

"The Quaffle is released, and Davies in possession."

Katie had instructed the team to score as high as they could, because of Ravenclaw's high point average.

Harry scanned the ground for signs of the Snitch but couldn't find any. With the corner of his eye, he peeked at Cho who was following him at a distance, which was well for him, as he didn't need reminding that he went wonky whenever he looked at her.

"Bell sweeps down and with Finnigan on Davies's tail, grabs the Quaffle at the perfect time.

"OWW!" Dean mouthed sourly.

McLain's Bludger had almost knocked Katie from her broom, but she kept steady with her years of training, though in the process she lost the Quaffle to Chambers.

"Ooooh, Ravenclaw wants to play dirty!" Dean spat.

"Show 'em Gryffindors!" he yelled vehemently.

"Thomas, no biased commentary, please!" McGonagall shouted half-heartedly. She was upset like any other Gryffindor.

"Chambers enters the scoring area while Weasley prepares for battle. Another deadly Bludger is on its way and-" Dean said in a bored voice.

A tone of amazement crept into his voice as he continued, "a very well placed Bludger by Kirke, making Chambers quite empty handed. Ginny Weasley in possession.

"Was I dreaming or that was actually a *Bludger Backbeat*?" he said, amazed. "Hats off to Kirke for pulling that one off!

"Boot looks flustered as the red queen inches closer," Dean said offhandedly, while McGonagall gave him a sidelong glance.

"She swerves and with a terribly long arc scores the first goal of the match! Gryffindor: ten to zero," he finished satisfactorily.

Harry veered to his right for another round when he came face to face with Cho, who in turn smiled at him in such a charming way that he felt his heart flutter in his chest.

"*Focus! Focus!*" he scolded himself.

*What in the hell is the matter with me!* he thought shaking his head, while he headed upwards to get some air.

"Looks like our Seeker is a little disgruntled, today. Well, he can't help it, can he? His life's always in such danger, with You-Know-Who always on his tail and what not."

"Thomas! Stop talking about Potter's life and continue commentating!" McGonagall growled threateningly.

"Just providing some background info, Professor... er..." Dean faltered, seeing the fumes almost emanating from McGonagall.

Clearing his throat he continued, "Davies in possession, protected by Buchanan and McLain like a royalty, while Weasley looks more than ready for another quick save."

A loud collective groan issued from the audience as Ron was hit with two consecutive Bludgers, allowing Davies to score freely. Fortunately, Ron's robes tangled with his broom and he was saved from a face-first fall to the ground.

Dean swore loudly. "Squirmy little cheats! Foul, Foul, FOUL!"

Ginny went to her brother's rescue as Madam Hooch called a timeout. Ron bravely held up his hands telling his team-mates and the audience that he was fine and motioned to Harry to continue with his Snitch-hunt making a flying bird motion with his hands. Harry didn't have to picture a very bushy head bobbing up and down in the Gryffindor stand. He just hoped that Hermione clipped her nails before coming to the game.

"I've just been informed that the filthy lit-" Dean announced.

"Thomas!" McGonagall warned.

"The last *move* was not a foul but is known to be the *Dopplebeater Defense*. Looks like the Ravenclaws are studying more than the capacity in their heads," he finished, totally disgusted.

"Ravenclaw scores, bringing the game to equal, ten to ten."



After another hour to the game, Gryffindor was leading by twenty points with fifty to thirty; Ravensclaws were playing very well and every defensive tactic was used by both the teams.

Harry knew he didn't want to catch the Snitch so early, so he kept Cho busy by misleading her throughout the game. He steered his Firebolt lower, feigning to skim the corners of the pitch.

He was zigzagging through the Chasers, recognizing Seamus going for a *Transylvanian Tackle*, when he saw Cho steer her broom in the opposite direction. With a slight touch Firebolt did the same and he was following her towards the Ravenclaw-side of the pitch. To his horror, Harry saw the familiar golden glint, just below the center goalpost.

He gathered speed and like an arrow was beside Cho, right on course. He felt her register his presence, as she glanced towards him smiling and blew him an unexpected kiss. He became flabbergasted not only at the gesture but at the sudden mellowing sounds of the spectators.

His vision blurred and through all the haze, he saw the most beautiful girl riding an ancient Fireball.

*She must be a princess... Why else she would be grasping a golden tiara with wings?*

With a blink of an eye the vision was gone, replaced with the looming ground coming towards him by leaps and bounds. He felt his muscles convulse, as he realized that he was hanging from his broom with his right hand. The noise was turned back on and he heard angry shouts, half drowned by scattered clapping and jeering. The feeling of utter foreboding settled upon him as his head swam along the possibilities of such noise. He lost his grip and within a heartbeat, darkness swallowed him.

-x-

Ginny was chasing Chambers when she heard the telltale sound of the whistle of the Snitch being caught. The play ceased and all the players looked around in bewilderment to find which team had won.

The crowd erupted in such force that nothing was audible except the unintelligible shouts and jeers. In the middle of complete disarray of robes and brooms, she saw Ron streak towards the ground.

"Ravenclaw wins." Dean's dejected voice reverberated in the Pitch.

Ginny couldn't believe her ears but somehow Harry didn't catch the Snitch, meaning... She shook her head; she didn't want to dwell in that particular thought. She followed her brother and the rest of the Gryffindor team towards a specific spot on the ground.

Nothing was visible except the numerous heads. So instead she looked at Cho, who was being hugged by the Ravenclaw team.

There was nothing false about her winning grin as she showed off the limp Snitch in her hands to her team-mates. Ginny had seen a very similar smile before; Padma Patil always had it before making the final move that almost always won her one of the best-looking boys in the school—a prelude they called as moving-for-the-kill.

Ginny seethed in contempt as she averted her gaze towards the Gryffindor team, which was slowly joined by the entire Gryffindor House. She didn't even want to think of consequences but the crowd's reaction reflected her own dread.

She remembered too well that Harry only had lost a game before, and it was only because of the arrival of the Dementors. She couldn't fathom how he lost against Cho...

However, all thoughts scampered away from her mind as soon as she saw Harry levitated by Ron and Hermione. Every other Gryffindor was gasping at the sight of his bloody robes and the odd angle of his left foot.

"Make way. MAKE WAY!" Hermione was screaming hoarsely at the crowd. Ginny was alarmed to find her face streaked with pink lines magnified by her spilled tears.

"A stretcher would be better," Ginny suggested, yelling above the hubbub and conjured a stretcher with her wand.

"Yeah." Ron looked at her distractedly and along Hermione positioned Harry above the stretcher and made their way towards the Hospital Wing, scattering the crowd.

Madam Pomfrey came sputtering in indignation, meeting them along the way to the Hospital.

"Quidditch, I tell you! Why don't they just kill them all now and save time?" she said pursing her lips, her voice shaking with ire.

-X-

*What a brilliant plan! Maybe Potter will die and I'll be able to get back to my life for good,* a person surrounded by the milling crowd of students thought.

*What was all that about? Potter fell and Cho won the match? A thing no one would ever dream about!*

*I just wish all this gets over soon. I'm tired and losing my patience. If this fall doesn't kill Potter, I'll have to switch to my last resort...*

*Potter, your days are numbered...* A sinister smile spread across that person's face.

-x.X.x-

### **Author's Note:**

*As I said before, today, Hermione Granger has decided to step out of my fic and volunteered to help me rap few things up.*

**Hermione:** Oh, hello, Tania.

**Tania:** :waves: Hiya, 'Mione.

**Hermione:** :glares: Never, ever, call me that!

**Tania:** :puzzled look: Er... why not?

**Hermione:** Because my name is Hermione, not 'Mione, which horribly resembles mayonnaise, mind you.

**Tania:** :apologetic glance: Ah, sorry, *Hermione*.

**Hermione:** No problem. :smiles:

**Tania:** So, why were you so eager to come out of the fic:wants to kick herself for asking the know-it-all such an obvious question:

**Hermione:** Glad, you asked me that, Tania. I was eager to help you out in the podgy punctuation and some horrible styling errors that you've done before. :Tania blushes in the background:

Here are a few things that you can do to correct your work. :Tania looks astonished at the pile of slips that is sticking out of a file handed to her by Hermione:

**Tania:** Er... I'll try my best, Hermione.

**Hermione:** I hope you don't mind? I do like to be thorough.

**Tania:** :gulps: Yes, yes, I realize that now...

**Hermione:** So, you've been getting a lot of questions and here's list of them that I made.

**Tania:** :is speechless after seeing a ten foot long parchment:

**Hermione:** Tania, are you all right:looks concerned:

**Tania:** I'm peachy. Uh... don't worry about me. :smiles meekly while sifting through the list:

**Hermione:** Tell the readers, why are you torturing Harry so:incredulous tone:

**Tania:** This question is nowhere in the list. Are you making up your own?

**Hermione:** Er... well, this was the only question I could ask you from Harry-which was suitable for the audience-as he's hopping mad at you. Honestly, he is!

**Tania:** :sighs: He'll love me by the end. The only thing I can say to him is to have his seat buckles on, because he'll be going for a rollercoaster ride, soon!

:Seeing Hermione on the verge of asking another questionable question, Tania butts in and starts on the first question from the list:

**Sirius's Diary:** Here's something that I'm proud of. I thought long and hard on this one. How to make Sirius return without causing any discrepancy; my only answer was a diary. I know the rule that Harry can't see Sirius again is a major bummer but I *needed* to do that—

**Hermione:** Honestly! He was sick for *days* because of that. Why don't you just kill him now?

**Tania:** He won't be killed. Not by me at any rate. You should ask that question to your beloved J. K. Rowling. So, patience, Hermione, patience; it is the key. :winks:

**Hermione:** Was that a Dumbledorish hint? If it was, you are not even near.

**Tania:** You just don't know. :gives Hermione a sympathetic pat:

**Hermione:** :glowers: Tell me about the Sirius Sightings? Why are you teasing your readers so?

**Tania:** Ah... the **Sirius Sightings**. Well, honestly speaking, it is no coincidence and people will find out soon enough.

I should also discuss the **mysterious person**, who is eager to finish off Harry. The person is a student and that's all I can tell you for now.

**Hermione:** What are you up to with **Harry/Cho/Ginny triangle**?

**Tania:** Er... this one is tough! But, let me put all your minds to rest. H/G is what I plan to do. Cho might stink things up for a while but not for long!

And that reminds me about **any Hermione/Ron**.

**Hermione:** I'm temporarily deaf. I can't hear you. Lalalalalalaaa  
lalalalalalaaaaaaaaaaaaa!

**Tania:** :yells over all the horrible singing: There is definitely more  
Hr/R coming. Stay tuned!

**Hermione:** Finished yelling:smirks: So, have you made **any new  
changes to the fic?**

**Tania:** Yes, surely. Have edited the whole lot! So, a peek on previous  
chapters would be better.

## - CHAPTER 21 - The Ugly Truth -

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For Ginny, it was a deja vu all over again as Ron and Hermione took Harry to the 'Potter-Ward' and was called by Madam Pomfrey to help.

For Ron, it was something that he was getting used to. He had been setting Harry on the bed when he heard him groan.

"Hermione, he's waking up!" he said in a panic-stricken voice, knowing too well that his friend would face less pain if he didn't.

"Agghh! I can never think under pressure!" Hermione screamed in frustration.

"I'd keep my voice down, if I were you, Ms. Granger," Professor McGonagall said entering the ward, closely followed by Ginny and Madam Pomfrey, who made Harry unconscious again.

"That was quite a fall," McGonagall said bracingly, looking at Harry.

"If you all could wait outside, please," Madam Pomfrey said. It was not a request neither a command but everybody got the message, clear as the daylight.

x-

Hermione cursed the time when she had thought, *What if, he blunders along while catching the Snitch and Cho finally gets to him?*

She had shuddered in utter anxiety but couldn't have helped feeling squeamish. And unfortunately, her thoughts had gone spot-on and even being an acknowledged know-it-all didn't help matters.

Oh, why, oh why, hadn't she searched Cho's *real* intentions when her suspicion-bell rang loud and clear whenever she was around Harry. *What's the use of being an insufferable know-it-all, when you can't even help your own friends!* she thought dismally.

"Hermione, calm down," Ginny said in a whisper, pushing Hermione's hands away from her face—which were clutching it painfully—leaving the pink nail-marks even more pronounced.

She sighed dejectedly, looking at Ginny and thinking, *Why couldn't have Harry fallen for Ginny instead? She's sweet and would've loved him back rather than what Cho has done...*

x-

Ron had been sitting in the corner bench from the time Professor McGonagall had left for the office, waiting for Madam Pomfrey to come out. He was still in his Quidditch gear, unknowingly spattering mud on the clean infirmary floor.

He had left the girls to their own space because he didn't want to tread on their conversation, and actually, he wanted to be left alone himself.

The current incident had mentally drained him. He was suddenly missing his twin brothers, who could be real great prats if they wanted to be, but nonetheless were masters of turning a dreary situation to a light-hearted one in a jiffy. Even Percy could have worked to his dismay, even if he would have lectured them on some nonsense like the intricacies of a pewter cauldron or Merlin knows what, as he always did.

"Bloody Hell!" he bellowed unexpectedly, slamming his fist on the bench and trapping his mouth against the painful response it produced.

x-

"Ron doesn't look so good," Ginny whispered to Hermione, seeing her brother slam his fist on the bench.

Hermione nodded her head in agreement, staring at Ron's lanky frame slumped over the bench.

Madam Pomfrey at last came out of the Potter-Ward and faltered, noticing the students. "You all are still here?"



Ron answered with a question of his own, "How is he?"

"He is not all right but he will be, soon."

"Er... what injuries has he got—"

"—this time?" Madam Pomfrey supplied. She continued puffing with indignation, "Let me see... a broken wrist, three contusions, and yes... a broken leg, which will take a week to heal," she finished, pointedly looking at their Quidditch uniforms.

"But couldn't you heal it sooner?" Hermione asked in a small voice.

"Well, no! Of all the people, you should know better, Ms.Granger, that tibia-fibula needs time to heal. Muggles may take months to heal it but magic still has some ancient remedies... And for goodness sakes! Look at you, have you been scratching your face all day long?" she asked, looking alarmingly at Hermione's long nail scratches on her face. She speedily steered her into the adjacent ward for cleaning up.

"Ron, look at you! You haven't even changed," Ginny said amiably, sugaring it with a motherly touch, successfully distracting him from his own reverie.

"And what have you been doing, Mum? De-gnoming the garden or playing as a proxy Chaser?" Ron retorted with a smile, pointing at her Quidditch uniform. Ginny wasn't spattering mud all over, but she was undoubtedly not cleaner than her own brother.

She grinned sheepishly in response and they both sighed collectively, catching each other's eye again.

"Don't tell me you are still fancy him?" Ron asked abruptly, not as an over-protective brother but as a concerned distant friend.

"Don't tell me you still haven't confessed to Hermione?" Ginny asked, raising her eyebrows.

They both shrugged their shoulders and made faces at each other and caught each other in the nick of time again, seeing Madam Pomfrey return with a healed Hermione.

"Well, run along! Harry is sleeping and you all need your sleep as well," Madam Pomfrey admonished.

They were rounding the Infirmary corridor when they heard the familiar thumps of Hagrid's footsteps.

"How's Harry?" he asked concernedly.

"He's okay, Hagrid. Madam Pomfrey did a good job on him; he's resting now," Ginny supplied helpfully.

"He's alright, eh?" he asked again, with a concerned look.

"He's healing, Hagrid," Hermione provided.

"Them ruddy fires! Bin looking all over the forest! Didn' know about him being injured an' all," Hagrid muttered.

It was then, when all of them noticed his patchy jacket charred from places and his right hand bandaged with a dirty looking handkerchief.

"What fires, Hagrid?" Hermione asked, looking highly interested.

"Dunno who' bin settin' 'em abou'. Happenin' since Octobe', mind. It's normal yeh see? It's cold an' all and student' light bonfire' all the time. But, never bin like this... Ever.... Could've harmed them trees, an' with Magorian all angry, bin stoppin' meself goin' in there ter look around."

"Fires using Floo powder, Hagrid?" Hermione asked urgently.

"Yeah, but why do yeh—" Hagrid was cut by Hermione, as she hugged him tight, thanking him profusely.

"Oh, thank you, Hagrid!"

"Wha' fer?" he asked in a puzzled voice.

"You can figure that out on your own, Hagrid!" she said almost skipping.

"Ron, Ginny, I'll be along within an hour," Hermione announced and almost flounced in the opposite direction.

"What's up with her?" Ron asked in a bewildered voice.

Hagrid scratched his beard and looked at them thoughtfully and without saying anything traced his footsteps back towards the Entrance Hall.

"Well?" Ginny said.

"Must be onto something..." Ron said, scratching his own chin.  
"Reckon where Hermione went?" Ron asked raking his brains.

"Where Hermione always goes when unsure: to the *Library*," Ginny answered amusingly.

x-

Harry came to in a very bleary room which looked oddly familiar. He tried to move but to no avail; he wasn't even able to move a single muscle of his body. Every nerve was ominously dead and he seemed not to be aware of anything except a throbbing pain in his forehead. He touched it with his stiff right arm and found it covered with bandages.

Daylight was peeking through the curtains of the ward and he could guess that he had been asleep for quite a while. He craned his neck to look around the hazy room when he saw a figure slumped over a chair.

He put on his glasses and found Lupin dozing on a chair. The light flitting through the window was casting a strange halo around him and even with the trace of morning stubble and graying hair; he looked almost like a higher being. Harry was just thinking about how much Lupin had helped him cope this term when he woke up with a start.

"Harry! You are awake," Lupin said with a start and then smiled at him.

"Yeah, I am," he answered groggily. "How long was I out?"

"About a day and few hours."

"WHAT!"

"Well, you were given sleeping draught to ease your pain." Lupin gestured towards the cast on his right leg, which was dangling in air with the help of strings.

"We lost, didn't we?" Harry inquired in a small voice, as if he wanted to reaffirm the results.

"Yes," Lupin answered simply. "It was a game, Harry, it doesn't matter."

Harry snorted cynically but halfway through it turned into a cough, which almost slammed his heart to his chest.

Lupin worriedly made to call Madam Pomfrey but she was already entering the ward with a bellowed, "Oh dear!"

Harry's throat felt like it was filled with a forest of cactuses on fire.

Madam Pomfrey performed a soothing charm over him and did some advanced magic on his throat, which at least stopped feeling scratched from inside and his lungs filled with air again.

"He still has contusions in the lungs; it will heal in a day," said Madam Pomfrey, tipping a spoonful of syrup into his mouth.

Lupin made a grim face and asked the Matron, "How long would it take for him to walk about normally again?"

"More than a week, I presume," she said checking his pulse and temperature.

Harry looked at his bedside again while Lupin and Madam Pomfrey talked. He was not amazed to find fewer get-well cards than the last time he was in the 'Potter-Ward'.

"Don't look so grim, Harry," Lupin consoled when Madam Pomfrey left them alone to see to her other patients.

"I think I lost more than just a match, Lupin," said Harry, laying back into his pillow.

Lupin looked at him thoughtfully. "Do you know McGonagall specifically told me to inform you that she's not at all upset at the results? She was devastated that you would feel pressured just because she told you to get the Cup. Harry, there are more important things in life than winning or losing and you would be able to understand this more than anyone as you have been through these turns of time before.... You are all right and that's the only thing that matters," Lupin finished, patting his arm.

Harry didn't know how but somehow Lupin could always make him feel better, no matter what.

"And I would rest, if I were you." As if remembering something, he said, "Before I forget, your friends have sent you their warm wishes. They didn't budge last night before they were shoved out of here, but you probably know that already; they'll be here as soon as today's classes end. Now, rest." With these words Lupin tucked him in and went out of the ward.

x-

If it hadn't been for too much squealing, Harry would have continued dozing.

"Look at his face! It's healed!"

Harry could guess that voice from anywhere, it was Hermione. She in turn almost shrieked with joy seeing him awake.

"Miss Granger!" exclaimed Madam Pomfrey coming inside the ward, looking appalled at her behavior. "You are supposed to set an example of discipline, not otherwise."

"Oh, sorry," said Hermione, sheepishly grinning at the Matron.

She was followed by Ron, Ginny and Luna, who came over and sat near his bed, giving him encouraging smiles.

Madam Pomfrey, after checking over Harry went out, warning them to keep their voices down.

"How bad was it?" Harry asked bracingly, trying to get things out in the open.

"Oh, all will be fine in a week," said Hermione, patting his cast-leg lightly, while Ron and Ginny exchanged dark looks.

"I wasn't talking about me. I was asking about the game," said Harry, exasperatedly.

"Tense?" Hermione provided, trying to be funny but failed miserably.

"You can tell me, I'm a big boy now! I can even guess that the entire House must be horribly disappointed at me," said Harry, sighing to his pillow.

"Well, not all of them," Ron said helpfully, causing the girls to glare at him.

"It wasn't your fault, Harry!" said Hermione fervently.

"It was Cho's fault," Luna said with a knowing air.

"What do you mean it was Cho's fault and not mine? I lost the Snitch! Like a blundering idiot, I let her catch it! How moronic is *that*, can you imagine?" Harry bellowed at them. "It was just near my buggering fingertips and I let it go, I let it—"

Ron cut in between, "Harry! It wasn't your fault, mate, so just shut up will you?" he finished rolling his eyes.

For once, Luna and Hermione agreed on the fact that Harry was blaming himself with no reason, as they rolled their eyes at him and had the same expression of too-much-knowledge on their faces.

"How can it be 'not my fault'?" Harry asked angrily.

"Cho was using a Love Potion on you, Harry," said Hermione airily, while Ginny grimaced in silence.

"A *what*?" Harry couldn't believe his ears.

"Yes, Harry, she used the legendary Love Potion on you—a mild version of it. She has been starting numerous fires with Floo powder to get Ashwinder's eggs, which are the main ingredient," said Hermione, making a face.

"You can guess the wickedness of that girl by her actions. Not only she made you her tail-wagging pup but she killed all those poor Ashwinder larvae," Luna supplied in her spacey way, scrunching up her nose.

Harry smiled to himself; his friends were giving him stupid explanations to cheer him up and get the blame off his head.

"I know what you all are trying to do and I appreciate it but, please... don't blame it on some stupid hogwash!" Harry exclaimed.

Ron puffed up. "It's not hogwash; they're telling you the truth! If they weren't, then just tell me why you always acted weird around Cho, when you told us you didn't have any feelings for her?"

"Well... I dunno." Harry shrugged.

"*Well*, because she was using you! And don't tell me, you don't remember the night she almost threw herself at you!"

Ginny's head snapped up from its foreboding, while Hermione gaped, looking from Harry to Ron. Luna simply flicked her nails in an uninterested way, as if this particular information was not new to her.

Even when it was not Harry's fault, he felt so ashamed that he wanted the earth to part and go inside in its cold folds. The shadow of the hurt that he saw in Ginny's eyes was nothing but heart wrenching.

"It isn't your fault, Harry," Hermione repeated, trying to console him.

"It was a potion, wasn't it? So, how could it have worked when she didn't make me drink anything?" Harry asked, bewildered.

"As I told you, Harry, it was a mild version of the Love Potion. The one using it has to drink it and then activate it by taking a drop of the same potion and rub it on one's skin to trigger the effect of the potion, which is to make the targeted person see them as the most beautiful being and go nutters," Hermione answered knowledgeably.

Harry didn't bother to ask from where she got all this information as he was well aware that she must have researched it in the Library. He tried not to think about 'going nutters' while he asked confusedly, "Rub it on skin?"

"Any exposed part. Most of the users store the potion in a vial and use a drop from it on a finger and rub it on the skin with their thumb."

"And this works?" Ron asked curiously.

"Yes, Ron." Hermione looked at him questioningly, as if wanting to say more but holding herself in check.

It was then that Harry remembered about the thumb-rubbing. Whenever Cho met him, her thumb worked against her index finger. He had labeled that to be a sign of her nervousness but now when he thought about it, this could have been the hint he was looking for.

"But, why!" Harry asked in frustration.

"Do you really want to know?" Hermione asked seriously.

"Yes!" Harry exclaimed exasperatedly.

Hermione exchanged looks with Ron, as Luna got prepared to impart her contribution to their dialogue.

"I knew that there was something fishy going on, but really, couldn't put my finger on it till I overheard Cho talking to Marietta," Luna began as if unfolding a conspiracy.



"No one really sees me in the Ravenclaw common room, as I mostly hide behind either Quibbler or some other book. So, you can imagine me as a piece of furniture lying about, as nobody gives me any heed," she paused to look around them, while Hermione waved her hand to signal her to hurry it up, while the rest of them listened with rapt attention.

Totally unperturbed, she continued as if not noticing Hermione at all, "As I was saying: one day, there I was, engrossed in one of the classic editions of Quibbler when I heard too much whispering. I recognize individual whispers as well, so I knew that Marietta was scheming something *evil*, but found something to the contrary.

"It was Cho, who was issuing orders to Marietta. They were talking about brewing a potion in their room during lunch break when everyone was out. Cho knew all the ingredients and method; they only needed twenty three minutes to prepare it. Hearing this, I tuned a little closer and found that she was ready to catch the Golden Snitch after all. I didn't understand who they were referring to until Cho caught the Snitch in the match. She was obviously referring to you." Luna looked at Harry meaningfully, as he made a disgusted face along with everybody present in the ward.

"But, why did she have to go to such lengths? Only to win a match, she concocted a Love Potion?" Ginny looked unconvinced.

"You are right, Ginny. We can only guess as we don't have any concrete evidence except Luna's statement," Hermione answered, shrugging her shoulders. "I think, Cho was simply angry and felt humiliated after Harry dumped her last term. May be that anger of hers built into something more after realizing that Harry didn't become the ideal boyfriend she wanted."

"I'm telling you, she's simply *evil*!" Luna provided vehemently. "Just look at the rumors she spread about Harry snogging her to death when I found that nothing such happened."

Harry winced, realizing that they all knew what had happened in the Room of Requirement.

"Rumors?" Ron asked, looking interested, while Harry looked as if ready to pounce on his best mate.

"You know, that their rendezvous really went well and Harry wanted her back, which he proved with his passionate kiss," Luna provided candidly, while Harry made a choking sound.

"I didn't kiss her!" Harry said resolutely, mustering all his courage.

"Yeah, it was Cho who flung herself at Harry, not otherwise," Ron defended.

"Still, all of these attention-getting techniques doesn't necessarily make her evil, neither does trying to win over and dumping Harry, which seemed to be her plan. It can simply be an ego problem or a tick-off that caused her to take such a severe step," Hermione tried to rationalize. "Losing Cedric wasn't easy for her and losing Harry might have caused her to do the opposite of crying her eyes out."

Harry's head snapped up from its brooding state, where he was actually scowling at himself. "I thought our break off was a mutual decision.... By the end of term, I wasn't really in a state to do anything, how could I have continued with a relationship which just didn't fit? And wasn't she going out with Michael Corner?" Harry looked at Ginny for affirmation.

She nodded her head. "He ran after her the moment she signaled to him," she said in a relieved voice, without any traces of bitterness.

"So, what went wrong?" Ron asked thoughtfully. "Why did she have to do this entire scary-witch thing?"

"I dunno... I never harmed her intentionally. I would definitely ask her why she did all this," Harry said decidedly.

"It might not be such a good idea, Harry," Hermione warned.

"But why?"

"If you remember, someone is already pining to kill you. I'm not saying it's Cho, but she can be. You should never underestimate anyone—"

"Especially a Ravenclaw," Luna cut in between.

"That, we'll have to find out soon enough," said Ron resolutely, while Harry looked at Ginny's up-turned face towards the setting sun.

x.X.x-

## Chapter 22 – Confrontations

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After spending another two days in the Hospital Wing, Harry finally coaxed Madam Pomfrey to let him leave. It was no use marinating in Potter-Ward, as there was nothing more magic could do for his injuries.

He was given a cane for balance as his right leg wasn't healed yet. He cautiously made his way to the Hogwarts Lake, towards his favorite beech tree. He had made some decisions while he was in the infirmary; he wanted to stick to them and carry them out the rest of the term. It was time that he dealt with all the matters at hand before they blew up in his face. He needed to get a grip—

"Ahoy, Potter!" a very familiar voice drawled from behind a tree.

Harry knew, who he was going to face. He didn't need the sight of the pointy face to tell whose voice it was.

"Having a lonesome stroll? Where are your two obedient side-kicks?" Draco Malfoy leered indulgently at him.

"They are my friends *not* sidekicks. They might be enjoying a nice break, right about now," Harry answered coldly, leaning on his cane for an upright position.

"How touchy-feely," Draco said, his smirk sliding in place.

Harry was about to answer when he felt two pairs of hands grab him from behind. The cane slipped and he was shoved to the ground face-first by the two official Malfoy trolls: Crabbe and Goyle.

Harry spat out the grass and rolled over to see the smirking face of his nemesis. A sudden bolt of anger surged through his body; he wanted to crush this toe-rag into nothingness. He took out his wand but Goyle, with quite surprising reflexes, kicked it away from his grasp.

"You cannot squirm away so easily every time, Potter. I will finish you off like your worthless parents and godfather; then I'll kill that Mudblood Granger and that little wease—"

“AGH! I’ve had enough!” Harry bellowed in pure molten anger, drowning out the rest of words spoken by Malfoy.

Everything went red for a second as if he lashed out at Malfoy in his mind. “You little slime ball!” Harry yelled angrily at Malfoy.

He felt a sudden surge of energy shooting from his body as all the sounds dimmed as if someone had pressed the mute button of the world surrounding him.

To his utter surprise, in a blink of an eye, there was no Malfoy to be seen. One second he was there and in the other, he wasn’t.

In utter shock, Harry hoisted himself up from the ground gripping the cane to take a closer look, while Crabbe and Goyle wandered about where Malfoy had stood, making unintelligible noises.

Harry noticed someone call his name and he saw Ginny’s figure rushing towards him, dragging along her bulky school bag.

“Harry! Are you all right?”

“Where did you come from?” Harry asked nonplussed. He didn’t want to be rude but the words just blurted from his mouth.

“Our Herbology class just ended.” She looked at Crabbe and Goyle suspiciously and whispered to him, “Did they do something to you? Why were you lying on the ground?”

Harry had his own questions to ask. “Did you see Malfoy?”

Ginny shook her head no.

“You killed him! You *killed* him!” Goyle looked like he was choking, while Crabbe stupidly patted his back.

“What are you two buffoons talking about?” Ginny asked incredulously.

“Scarhead killed Malfoy!”

“*Really*, now!” Ginny rolled her eyes, while Harry felt panic take over him.

He didn’t know what had happened; what he did know was that things went horribly wrong when Malfoy cursed at his loved-ones. He only remembered a sudden burst of energy surrounding him and then all was normal.

Something similar to confusion passed through Ginny’s eyes. “Harry?” She gave him an inquiring look.

Before he could answer, Crabbe started screaming at the top of his voice while trying to keep away Goyle from a particular spot.

“Look, LOOK!”

“WHAT!” Harry and Ginny both bellowed at the same time.

Crabbe was pointing towards a slimy blob on the grass—it looked like a Flobberworm.

*What is a Flobberworm doing loose in the middle of the grounds?* Harry thought warily.

He looked closely and suddenly realized that it was the same spot, where Malfoy had stood seconds ago. *Could he?* Harry shook his head, but there was no question about it. The thing was a Flobberworm and it could easily be Malfoy.... *But... How?*

“Harry, what’s the matter?” Ginny whispered, looking quite worried.

“I think I have accidentally turned Malfoy into a Flobberworm,” he faintly whispered in her ear.

“You did *what?*” Ginny’s eyes were as wide as a puffer fish’s. She looked perplexed as she half grinned and grimaced at the slimy Flobberworm, lazily lying on the ground.

Even though the situation was serious, Harry couldn’t help smiling wickedly at Ginny. She in turn looked like she was planning something in her mind, as she grinned back at him.

"Now boys," she said to the two trolls, flicking her wand at them.

"Do you want my Bat-Bogey or a clear way to the Hospital Wing?" she asked, staring at them meaningfully, while Crabbe and Goyle stupidly gawked at her.

"Your spell misfired, do you understand?" She sashayed nearer to them, while Harry gaped at Ginny in wonder.

"But, it was *him*," Crabbe pointed towards Harry with a shaky stubby finger.

"*Who?*" Ginny looked around, as if there was no Harry standing beside her.

"The Scarhead!" Goyle bellowed.

"I see no *him* or even a *Scarhead* around here. For all I know, you two might be attempting to kill Draco Malfoy!" Ginny's eyes flashed, as she tried hard not to laugh and maintained a straight dead-serious face.

"We *never!*" Crabbe squeaked.

"You lie!" Goyle cried.

"Do I?" Ginny smirked at them. "Who would believe you two? Do you think McGonagall will accept that?" Ginny rounded at them. "So, if this Flobberworm is Draco Malfoy, all I saw was you two, trying to hex him." She cocked her eyebrows at them.

"But we didn't do anything!" Crabbe whined while Goyle glared at Ginny.

"That's what I was saying! A spell backfired... that's all." She flashed a smile at them, while they looked suspiciously at her and then at Harry.

Harry could almost see two different cog-wheels working in their brains as they stared from the Flobberworm to Ginny and him.

They jumped when two loud cracks filled the air. Both the trolls jumped on the spot, looking frighteningly at Ginny, who had issued two loud bangs from her wand. They started to edge away from them, when Ginny taunted, "I think you are forgetting a slimy friend of yours."

As soon as Goyle picked the disgusting thing off the ground, there were two more bangs.

"If I were you, I would hurry," Ginny goaded them, and as if on cue both the blundering trolls trotted towards the Entrance Hall in full speed.

Harry couldn't help but laugh at the two trolls bungling through the school grounds—his first genuine laugh since quite a while.

"You really didn't have to do that," Harry said, smiling at Ginny.

"Who said I did it for you? I couldn't miss bullying them a little, when they have done the same to so many others!" she exclaimed, smiling back at him.

"How's your leg, by the way?" Ginny inquired after a pause, sounding concerned.

"Ah, it will be healed soon enough; getting used to it really." Harry waved his free hand, while trying to find a topic of interest, and noticed the dark circles around her eyes instead.

"You don't look so good either," he said, slightly puzzled.

"Is that how you start conversations with girls?" Ginny cocked her eyebrow good-humouredly, smiling at him. "I've just been getting the O.W.L. jitters, you know," Ginny confided while looking at the ground.

They started strolling towards the Entrance Hall, through the winding pathways of the courtyard. The snow had dissipated and a hint of spring was just round the corner. Looking at the happy and contended faces of his fellow students, nobody would ever guess that the base of this magical world was threatened by a dark wizard who



didn't know when to stop, who in his power hunger had gone to such lengths as he had to achieve his precious immortality.

"But is he *really* immortal?" Harry suddenly blurted out, not realizing that he had wondered out loud.

"What?" Ginny furrowed her brows and then sighed deeply, understanding his question. *Someone has to teach him a lesson on conversation!* Ginny thought, amused.

"He claims to be, doesn't he? And the kind of magic he does and what you told us about how he came back using the flesh, blood and bones of others, he could be. But there's *always* a loophole, as Dad says. Maybe you would be able to vanquish him completely this time around..." Ginny faltered, looking into his eyes.

"I reckon it wouldn't be so easy and I might not even live to tell that tale," answered Harry, without breaking eye contact—quite amazed at himself, and at how easily he was pouring out his doubts in front of Ginny.

Ginny stiffened, breaking the eye contact, pushing her hands into her robe pockets. "It's not so black and white, Harry. There's always a place for grey and that's where your answer lies. Life is not just taking a breath, surviving monotonous days and finally dying. There are so many things that come in between and are so easily ignored by all of us... little things that nobody notices. Take breakfast for example: everyday we eat delicious delicacies that some people could only dream of, we are getting the best education and living a magical life, which I can assure you many Muggles would die for."

She continued, not knowing that her eyes were flashing with deep-woven thoughtfulness, mesmerizing Harry.

"I know this whole Dark Side thing seems really bad, but it's never long-lived. Look at Grindelwald, did he survive? He was acting like Voldemort is now but he was defeated by Dumbledore, wasn't he? And somebody will do the same to Voldemort too, and it could just as well be you," she paused, looking at him meaningfully.

"I just wish that we could just stop and appreciate what we have *now* rather than what *will* be. Sometimes, I think we should just listen, feel and see!" exasperation crept in her voice, making it a little high-pitched. She splayed her hands outwards in frustration as if willing him to do just that.

It was then she saw him looking at her with utter concentration and wilted under his gaze. She cast her eyes down while two patches of red appeared on her cheeks.

"Sorry, I shouldn't have been so..." she trailed off, looking at him searchingly, while he stared at her, enthralled.

*Did she have so many emotions bottled up inside her all along, and never showed them to anybody?* Harry wondered.

"No, you *are* right." Harry tried hard not to gawk and succeeded more or less as they neared the stairs leading to the Gryffindor common room.

"Hey, Ginny, I've been looking all over for you!" Michael Corner came bounding in view.

"Michael, what a surprise," Ginny looked ill at ease, as she looked at Corner.

"Oh." Michael stopped seeing Harry, catching his breath. "If you are busy, we can talk later," he said earnestly.

"Oh no, we were just—" Ginny was cut off by Harry.

"Ginny, you go on. At any rate, I have to catch up with Ron and Hermione," Harry said, making up an excuse.

Ginny looked at him imploringly and then made her way to the Great Hall with Michael, giving him a long backward glance.

Harry continued towards his destination, kicking himself in his own mind for always being such a *good* boy. He was in no the mood of climbing all the stairs, therefore, he made for the nearest secret passage to reach the Gryffindor common room.

Halfway through the journey while coming out of a tapestry, the air around him suddenly became brittle as he saw Cho coming his way. He wasn't really ready to talk to her, even when he had thought about it and would have eventually done so.

However, the face-off looked rather imminent and it was already late to look for a cover, so he continued his slow tread, averting his eyes from Cho.

"Harry?" Cho's said timidly.

Harry's head snapped towards her, his eyes showing a mixture of disdain and surprise. He never thought she would initiate a talk after what she had done to him. So, he didn't reply and stared at her hands, which were splayed downwards, as if in anxiety.

Cho followed his pointed gaze and blushed. "I- I went to the Hospital wing to look for you—"

"Oh really?" He wasn't buying a single word from her.

"Okay, fine. I didn't go to the Hospital Wing, but I was looking for you." Seeing the skeptical expression on Harry's face, she continued on, "I want to straighten some things out, Harry."

"Hmm," Harry mused loudly. "Things like: lying, spreading rumors, cheating and... I think I'm still missing something," he finished, staring at her darkly, remembering the way she had tried to seduce him in the Room of Requirement.

With that he remembered something else as well. "It was you who wrote that note, isn't it? *Harry Potter you are mine* – right?" Harry didn't know either to burst in gales of laughter or expletives, so he chose to stay silent instead.

Cho bowed her head as she started wringing her hands. "It wasn't all that, Harry... Yes, it was me,"—her face turned crimson with embarrassment—"but let me continue. Please?" Cho pleaded, looking at his open mouth as he was about to interrupt her again.

“Sure.” Harry shrugged his shoulders with the knowledge that whatever she would say would make no difference to him whatsoever. Gryffindor lost the final Quidditch match because of some petty obsession of hers, which he still wasn’t quite clear on. Moreover, he became the laughing stock of the whole school and lost precious time off his Advanced Training due to his injury. *No difference, none at all!*

“I really didn’t want to harm you, Harry—”

“You said this before. How do I know, you are not lying again? And why would I care? What’s done is done.”

“Will you please let me finish?”

“Okay. Go on,” he said indifferently.

“I never thought you would get injured so badly. I just wanted to defeat you at Quidditch. I wanted to teach you a lesson. I wanted to humiliate you in front of your whole House.”

Harry’s eyes widened with her statement. “What did I ever do to you!”

Cho matched his stare and said, “You never cared for me, when we dated. You were always busy doing *things* with your friends, but never with me.... What I’m trying to say, Harry, is that, you never came near my expectations. I wanted to know you more... I wanted to talk to you about Cedric but you never listened. It was as if, he was dead, so leave him dead—”

“It isn’t like that!” Harry couldn’t believe what he was hearing. Cho never understood him at all. “How would you feel, if you were dating the girlfriend of a bloke who got killed in front of your eyes? I had lost sleep because of his death; it had been that upsetting for me. How could I have opened old wounds when they needed to heal? What exactly could I’ve talked about him, Cho? Did you want to know how he died!”

Cho looked at him as if dumbfounded.

“I can assure you,” Harry continued, “I liked you once, but there just wasn’t much common between us except a death.... By the end of

the last term, you started dating Corner and I was fine with that. I never thought you would come haunting me with a Love Potion!" Harry had to lower his voice as a few frightened first-years trotted past them in the corridor.

Cho looked stricken. "I- I never thought from your point of view. Believe me, Harry, I had reasons to do all this—"

"Are you finished? Have you humiliated me enough? Are you through or should I continue looking for some more weird devices of yours?" Harry spat distastefully.

Cho took a deep breath and said, "I just wanted to get back at you for dumping me so rudely. I was already distraught with Cedric's death and dating you wasn't easy. I couldn't even catch the Snitch even when you weren't present in the finals. I felt just awful! You just wouldn't understand!" Her voice became shrill as she continued, not meeting his eye.

"I just wanted to show you that I could win as well, even when the Boy-Who-Lived was playing against me.... I'm not sorry, but I just wanted to tell you that I never meant physical harm. And that we are even." With that she spun on her heels and marched off in the opposite direction.

Harry simply stared after her, his mouth agape at her shallowness. And there was a time that he liked her. *Ugh!*

Harry shook his head to clear it and made for the Gryffindor common room, arranging his thoughts. On reaching the portrait hole, he remembered that he didn't know the current password. He literally wanted to kick himself now.

"Back from the Hospital Wing?" the Fat Lady asked, staring at him critically.

"Yes!" he said harshly—a thing that he didn't intended.

"You don't have to raise your voice, you know," the Fat Lady replied, sounding more than miffed. "I'm not *deaf!*"

“Sorry,” he whispered.

“Chipolatas.”

“I would say you are two days late. The password has been changed,” the Fat Lady replied sternly and glared at him pointedly.

He swore out loud while the Fat Lady flapped in indignation.

“Really, now! You need to get yourself checked again. Something is still inflating your head.” She sounded quite offended.

“I’m sorry, just a bad day,” Harry said sighing. He turned to go back down the stairs when the portrait hole swung open.

“Harry,” Neville exclaimed seeing him, “You are back!”

“Hey, Neville,” Harry said, more than pleased.

“Why were you going back?” Neville asked puzzled.

“Didn’t know the password,” Harry said sheepishly, while Neville gave him a sympathetic nod, as he did understand the consequences of not remembering or knowing the password quite well.

“Been there,” he said, winking at him.

The moment Harry entered the common room, almost all the heads swiveled towards him—a few gasps of surprise and murmurs issued—and he was caught in between Katie and Hermione, who fussed over him not unlike Mrs. Weasley.

“You are feeling all right?” Katie inquired, shaking his arm.

“Why do you have grass stuck in your hair?” Hermione eyed him suspiciously.

“Let him breathe!” Ron’s voice sounded, as he cleared the two girls in question and guided him to the nearest couch, shooing the first-years sitting on it with a glare.

“We were just planning on throwing a welcome back party for you, Harry,” Colin Creevey piped up from the armrest of the couch, while others groaned.

“And *I* was trying to make him understand that the bouncing bells wouldn’t be such a good idea for a welcome-back present!” Ron looked at Colin sternly.

“Er... what are they?” Harry asked incredulously.

“It’s a plant, Harry. They resemble huge bells and smell good too. But, if you stay near them too long, you start feeling a kind of headiness and before you know, you are bouncing all over the place, non-stop,” Neville said, making a face.

“But wouldn’t that be fun? All Harry needs is a little *lift-up*,” said Colin, with a huge grin on his face.

“No, Colin, I don’t need *that* kind of a lift up,” Harry said smiling, while shaking his head.

“You do have to catch up on your studies, Harry,” said Hermione—trying not to bristle at the retreating figure of Colin towards the portrait hole, looking dejected—changing the topic.

“And that’s why I have you as my friend,” Harry said cheekily, while Ron nodded along with him.

“*Funny!*” Hermione rolled her eyes.

“No *really*, Hermione. Where would we be without your guidance?” Ron winked at Harry while half curtsying to Hermione, who in turn looked at him with narrowed eyes.

“Why are you all disheveled?” Hermione asked, switching from her squint to a glare on Harry.

“That *is* a long story,” said Harry, sighing audibly, motioning them towards a more private corner of the common room. He started off with how he was taken by surprise by the Malfoy clan, and finished

with, "Somehow I turned Malfoy into a Flobberworm," taking out the Ginny part for some unknown reason.

A deathly silence followed, as the news sank into the group. Hermione's eyes were popping, while Ron was grinning at him manically.

"Blimey, Harry! How did you do it?" Ron asked, almost jumping from his seat.

"Are you sure you weren't imagining things?" Hermione asked, trying not to be flippant.

"How can you even say that? Malfoy deserved it and it was real!" Ron puffed glaring at her, as if daring her to say otherwise.

Harry quickly answered a "No," to Hermione, digging his elbow on Ron's lap and shutting him up before a completely different kind of war ensued. "It could have been, if Malfoy had gotten an invisibility cloak from his father, which is not the case," Harry elaborated, thinking about the sudden surge of energy that he had felt when he was helplessly lying on the ground.

He told them exactly what had happened and Hermione's eyes lit up as he mentioned about the energy that coursed through his body.

"In a way we all do it ... but it's when we don't know what we are doing." Looking at the vacant expressions on everyone's face, she continued in her explanatory voice, "For example, when I was four, I accidentally summoned the cookie jar from top of the fridge and my mum had a fit over it thinking that there were spirits lurking about in the house. It was my first sign of magic, but nothing such happened after getting inducted into Hogwarts." Hermione pondered on, "Though, I do remember reading about it somewhere—"

"I've heard a story about it," Ron chimed in, cutting Hermione.

"What kind of story?" Harry asked quizzically.

"It's one of those bed-time stories that Mum used to read to us," Ron said in an embarrassed manner, his ears turning red.



“Go on,” said Hermione, egging him on.

“It was about this wizard, who lived up on a mountain—kind of a loner. He knew a special kind of magic and didn’t need a wand to perform it. Children used to visit him on Halloween, when he used to give them thousand kinds of candies. But only good kids got it, not the naughty ones...” Ron stared off, as if reliving a distant memory. “I never believed in it though,” he finished with a shrug.

“It’s like a Wizard Father Christmas,” said Harry pondering over the similarities.

“Exactly,” said Hermione. “However, one thing is for sure. Almost all the ancient magic was wand-less. And just maybe, you are in the process of acquiring it?” she said, looking at him closely.

“Maybe,” Harry said with a distant voice, drowning in another series of thoughts. He continued on by unfolding the Cho saga, finishing with, “So, she wanted some kind of revenge and after ridiculing me, she says we are even.”

“Nutters!” said Ron.

“This is just too much!” Hermione waved her hands about. “So, it was simply a complex? How superficially petty of her,” she admonished.

“And there was a time, when you liked her,” Ron said, shaking his head disapprovingly, while Harry glared at him.

“Ron, it’s not Harry’s fault.”

“I’m not saying that. He should’ve been more careful—”

“Would you hear yourself—”

At this point Harry tuned his two best friends out. Something that he was getting used to, because interrupting them was like interrupting a waterfall which would fall over you even if you shouted at the top of your voice.

Now that the whole Cho episode was over, he felt almost light and at ease. In the least, one problem was solved. Now, he only had to solve the gateway puzzle, guess what Voldemort was up to and find out the student who wanted to kill him....

*Really, how hard all this can be?* he thought derisively, making his way to his room.

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## Chapter 23 – Getting a Clue

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Harry had been contemplating many things while sitting on his favorite windowsill of his room, alone in the dark. He had extinguished every torchlight and candle as soon as he had entered his room, after excusing himself from his friends.

The reason was not only the unique class of Defense Against the Dark Arts but the message that he had heard in a whisper from the creature that they had studied.

*You are in danger...*

He remembered how many times he had heard such warnings in his past. It was Hagrid in his first-year at Hogwarts, Dobby in second-year, Mr. Weasley in third-year, Crouch Junior disguised as Moody in fourth-year and the whole Order in the fifth-year. He had gotten so used to being threatened that it really didn't ring any panic bells at all.

And without even realizing it, he started going through the events of the last few hours in his mind, as innumerable neurons in his brain huddled together for another closer look.

It had been their first ever class that was scheduled after sundown and as they found out, it was for a reason. The suspense was almost killing the sixth-years when they were all led by Professor Vidal towards a bonfire near the Forbidden Forest.

Professor Vidal had smiled knowingly at them after nearing the bonfire. He had opened his arms in a welcome gesture and introduced them to three Vampires, who had swept into view so suddenly that many girls shrieked in alarm.

They all wore dark velvet robes and had similar pale faces. Their eyes shown in the night like glowing ambers. Their every step was silent and foreboding.

Harry could sense Ron's trepidation and Hermione's nerves, but even then there was only fascination when he looked towards the

legendary creatures known as the Undead, the night dueling Vampires.

Professor Vidal introduced them as David, Marak and Zoltan. The Vampires only nodded at the general direction of students and then stared at Vidal with interest.

Professor Vidal described their characteristics of blood hunger and invincibility, completely undaunted by their stares as if used to them. However, Harry was curiously able to observe that his right temple was ticking, which Harry guessed to be due to suppressing some kind of emotion. What emotion exactly he couldn't tell, because except for that tic, everything about the Defense Against the Dark Arts Professor seemed normal.

Harry scrutinized each and every feature of the Vampires staring unabashedly at them. Actually, two of them were playing the staring-game, whereas the one in the middle was simply staring at everything but the students. Two of the three had blonde hair while the middle one, presumably the leader, possessed long flowing black hair. The clothes beneath their cloaks along with their extra frills looked eighteenth century to the hilt.

Harry noticed a black gleaming stain on the cloak of the one on the right named David, and stared at it curiously. His gaze was met by the square-jawed blonde quite beguilingly. David opened his mouth, giving Harry full view of his tiny but visible fangs. He ran his tongue over the fangs lovingly in a come-on gesture. Harry could almost see the same gesture done by a predator after spotting a particularly juicy catch. Harry took a step back in disgust as he understood what the stain was—it had to be the only thing they gorged upon: blood.

David laughed giddily and whispered something in Marak's ear, who in turn glared at him sternly, which shut him quite eloquently up.

Harry was trying to tune in to Vidal's voice when his mind heard a whisper so close that if it hadn't been a male voice, he could have sworn it was Hermione. He shook his head and looked at Ron, who was trying to jot Vidal's points on a parchment, but was having difficulty like others in balancing his *Lumos*-ed wand and the quill for writing on the hovering parchment in front of him.

*"You seem to wilt beneath a heavy burden, little one."*

This time the voice was clearer but still somehow contained some whispering properties he couldn't lay his finger on.

"Did you hear that?" Harry asked Hermione, who was busily scribbling away on her hovering parchment, as if she had been trained for it since she took her first breath.

"Yes, Harry. The first Vampire had Slavic-Hungarian origin and is known as Count Vlad Drakul."

Harry blinked at her perplexingly and then sighed wearily. So hallucinations were not enough for him. He was now hearing voices as well!

Something clicked in his mind as he looked about the ground around him. He was a Parselmouth after all, so may be he had heard some secret conversation between two snakes. *Yeah! That could be it!* Harry thought hopefully.

A slow but throaty laughter wrung in his ears and Harry couldn't do anything but become more and more baffled. He looked around himself, trying to find the source of the laughter but no one was laughing! Everyone was busily scribbling away while Professor Vidal launched into an old Vampiric tale.

*The Vampires!* Harry's mind almost screamed.

Harry looked straight at them and found Marak staring at him, his eyes reflecting the bonfire's sultry flames.

*"Caught on, didn't you?"*

It was Marak all right. But his lips weren't moving and his eyes seemed to be doing the talking inside Harry's head.

*How can he do that!* Harry thought, bewildered at the situation.

*"I can do a lot more."* His eyes almost seemed to smile at him.

Suddenly Harry realized that this could be a trap. He guarded his mind as if practicing Occlumency. He started to empty his mind of all thoughts when he heard the faint but audible voice of Marak.

*“Don’t do that, little one. I mean no harm. I only want—no, need to talk to you.”* These words were spoken boldly but possessed a hint of pleading. If he was being tricked, Harry couldn’t tell, as the voice didn’t sound malicious even with the mysterious catch to it.

Harry had taken almost ten minutes to make-up his mind, while staring directly at Marak but with all the guards up inside his own mind. Marak, in turn only looked back matching his stare.

Nobody else got the inkling that there was something weird afoot between the Boy-Who-Lived and an ancient Vampire. Vidal went on with his story while the students went on with their scribbling.

Harry didn’t know that this was his new ability or simply the ability of Marak to infiltrate others’ minds. He had some consolation in the fact that he could have blocked the intrusion if he wanted to.

*What do you want to tell me?* Harry thought, looking directly at Marak.

*“Your life is in danger.”*

Harry wanted to laugh out loud. *Been there, done that. Anything else you might want to add?* There was more than sarcasm in Harry’s thought; there was an underlying pain that bled through his every word.

*“This is like never before, little one. What is about to happen now is more than you ever bargained for.”* The bonfire flames danced across Marak’s face as if delighted with every invisibly spoken word exchanged between them.

*What do you mean?*

*“You will come to know of it in time. However, all I can tell you now is to never forget your way; always leave a trail to come back to. Never forget who you are and—”*

At that instant another voice had interrupted them. Somehow Professor Vidal had sensed their exchange and was able to communicate with Marak in the same manner as Marak had done with Harry. He was only able to hear an angry curse in a different language and then, silence followed.

Harry started scribbling gibberish on his parchment and stole glances towards Vidal and Marak. But even after knowing that there was a conversation going on between them, he wasn't able to hear a single syllable. He couldn't tell if Vidal knew about what was said to him or why he was so livid after exchanging many glares with Marak. The Vampires had slinked off into the darkness of the trees after that, as if performing a vanishing act.

Many students gasped in surprise with their sudden disappearance but Professor Vidal filled the awkward departure as the sign for the class getting over. He eyed them all suspiciously, speculating on who had been communicating with the ancient Vampire. Harry centered his attention on Ron and Hermione who had somehow found another excuse to bicker even during such a serious class. Harry nodded his head as if trying to console Ron, not even aware of the reason why they were bickering. He looked at everything else but Professor Vidal while making his way towards the Entrance Hall with his class mates.

Harry found Neville questioning Vidal about the fangs of the Vampires and was surprised to see him lose his temper, as he admonished Neville for not paying attention in the class. Many of the student's attention had diverted towards Vidal as well and Harry got a clear view to deduce Vidal's mood. This was the first time that Vidal had scolded a student and Neville at that, who had worked real hard this term. Neville had turned the color of a beetroot while Vidal looked completely distracted. He had spun on his heels and made for his office, deep in thought, while Neville had made for the Library, not joining the rest of the Gryffindors to the common room.

Harry wasn't able to make up his mind about why Vidal was so upset. This was the first time that he had acted quite suspiciously. Harry knew that the Defense Against the Dark Arts job had always been jinxed. Whoever took the job had one problem or another. Having Voldemort sticking from the back of one's head or being a horrible

self-centered, toady teacher was one thing, but a person who went from good to guarded behavior was never a good omen. He had trusted Crouch Junior as Moody and if it hadn't been for Dumbledore's swift arrival, he might have just been killed in his fourth-year.

This brought him back to the current question in his mind. What to make of the Vampire's warning? And could he trust someone who was himself shrouded in the velvety folds of mystery? *Not this time.* He would be more careful and practice Occlumency hard so that nobody could infiltrate his mind—Vampire or not—even when that someone wanted to help, which he was very doubtful of.

Help from a Vampire. *Yeah, right!* They were known to be cunning and insatiable. How could he trust someone he didn't even know? *In danger indeed and a new kind at that!* He sighed derisively.

Shrugging noncommittally, Harry started preparing for bed.

Ron burst into the room just then, grumbling under his breath, “—*she knows everything... Miss Pain-In-The-Bum!*”

“What's the matter, Ron?” Harry inquired.

Somehow, he already knew the answer to that particular question. He had lived through, and spent numerous days, hearing the stifled bickering between his two best friends. Ron and Hermione's usual and unending squabbles could sprout from a single word or even a glare—their arguments were like worms in a can, waiting to get out.

“Can you believe what Hermione has done?” Ron looked at him incredulously. “She has hid my Wizard's Chess board, so that I can't play and *have* to study!”

*Typical,* Harry thought, not even letting a flicker of the smile which was bubbling inside him escape.

“I had been looking forward to beating Seamus today—”

“Again?” Harry interrupted raising an eyebrow.



“That’s beside the point, Harry! I was looking forward to some fun, not to stare at her ginger fur-ball prancing around my legs when she announced in front of the whole *bloody* common room exactly *why* she had confiscated my Chess board! As if a Troll in Potions was not enough!” he finished sourly.

“You could have used Dean’s set,” Harry supplied, playing along the ‘higher authority’ in the little game of bickering between Ron and Hermione.

“But it’s not *my* set! I don’t feel comfortable playing with other pieces. Those stupid midgets don’t follow my command,” he said huffily.

“She’s always bossing everyone around. Really, what that girl needs is a good hard spanking on that little—” Ron faltered in his blowing-off-steam, as he gulped for air looking at the meaningful look plastered on Harry’s face.

“What?” Ron inquired, narrowing his eyes.

“Everyone knows it. Now it’s time for you to spill it out.”

“What are you talking about, Harry?” Ron feigned ignorance.

Harry groaned audibly and made his way to Ron’s bedside table. Ron looked on wide-eyed as Harry started breaking the many locking charms on the bottom drawer.

“Hey!” Ron protested. But Harry flashed him a warning to shut him up, while sitting on Ron’s bed.

Ron slumped on the nearest chair dejectedly, while Harry rummaged through Ron’s drawer. “I have some right to privacy, you know,” Ron said, trying the last resort to stop his friend from confronting him.

“Yeah right! As if I would stop with *that*.” Harry flashed him a grin as Ron looked at him queasily.

“It is time for you, Ronald Weasley, to look at the facts,” Harry announced, bringing out the paraphernalia of items from the drawer

in question, putting them on the table near which Ron was already sitting.

Ron sighed glumly as Harry grabbed the first item: a wood splinter.

"Looks familiar to you?" Harry asked significantly, as Ron tousled his fringe in an irritated manner.

"Looks like you are better informed!" Ron retorted, totally piqued.

"Let me present you with the first proof, Milord." Harry shrugged at an invisible coat as he tried his best to strut around Ron along his cane. "A splinter from the club of a troll and no weeny troll at that: a Mountain Troll! The proof of Ron Weasley's valiant and brave attempt at saving a damsel in distress in a girl's bathroom!"

Harry smiled at Ron's flush, extremely enjoying this fake-court game. All thoughts of danger and Vampire warnings slipped from his mind as he realized that he might cause a breakthrough if he was able to make Ron confess his feelings to Hermione once and for all.

Ron grimaced and said, "I wasn't alone! You saved her as much as I did."

"But I'm not the one who saved a splinter from a mountain troll's club in my locked and loaded drawer." Harry stared at him meaningfully.

Ron bristled but didn't say anything as the second item was spread straight on the table.

"Second evidence," Harry waved the highly weathered page torn from a book, in front of Ron, "I don't think you are so much interested in basilisks that you've kept this page describing their characteristics.... But it might be here because Hermione was clutching this page in our second-year as if her life depended on it. Tom Riddle was prancing around Hogwarts with his slithering friend, remember?"

Ron stared at the word '*pipes*' written by Hermione on the torn page and almost went back in time to recall the utter shock that he had felt when he had seen Hermione's stiff and statue-like figure in the

Infirmery. He heard half of what Harry was saying, while continuing his list of evidences.

"Third proof," said Harry, unfastening a plastic bag, the content of which spilled out on the table. It was an assortment of candy wrappers: Chocolate Frogs, Every Flavor Beans and various Strawberry Twister wrappers.

Ron raised his eyebrows and glowered at him. "So, haven't taken out the trash. Big deal!"

Harry only smiled and answered, "It *is* a big deal, mate! These are not the wrappers of the candies you ate. Honestly, if all the things that you've eaten by now are piled up, it might just about fill the Chamber of Secrets to the brim."

Harry smiled coyly as he continued over a bristling Ron, "So tell me, Ron. From when have you started eating Strawberry Twisters?" Harry asked beguilingly.

Ron started to stutter when Harry filled his unsaid words, "Strawberry Twisters are Hermione's favorite sweet. Admit it, Ron! You've been collecting her thrown wrappers. What more do you want me to reveal?"

"Harry, you are nuts!" Ron tried his best to evade the ongoing tirade.

Harry rolled his eyes, totally annoyed at his friend's denial. He pointed at different items on the table and spilled their real identity. "Krum's action-figure's head ... S.P.E.W badge ... her scarf ... *her* broken quills! What more proof do you want, Ron? Who would save all this rubbish if that particular person didn't like the person whose memorabilia he's collecting?"

Ron covered his face with his hands and groaned to Merlin. *Was all this so obvious?* he thought to himself, as he wiped his brow and slumped deeper into the chair. He looked at the array of items rudely but visibly spread before him. The truth was out in the open and he didn't have any choice but to share it with his best mate. A thing he reckoned, he should have done a long time ago.

"Bloody Hell," said Ron, halfheartedly.

Harry folded his hands while finally settling down on his four-poster and stared resolutely at Ron, giving him full reign to speak.

Ron, after looking at everything but Harry and not meeting his eyes, finally gave up and opened his mouth to speak, "You are right *Rowena Ravenclaw*. It's true that I have feelings for Hermione Granger but I don't reckon it's likewise." He sighed miserably and tousled his fringe.

"How do you know?" Harry asked. He had his own reasons to believe that Hermione knew about Ron's feelings.

"I just know. She still writes to Krum... I'm nowhere in her life," Ron finished dejectedly.

Harry rolled his eyes. "She's with you ... what was that?" Harry scratched his head as if looking for an answer and burst out, "*Every Day!* Krum's just her friend and I reckon that's all there is to it."

"Yeah right! And I'm the richest wizard in history!"

"Oh c'mon, Ron, do you honestly believe that Hermione loves Krum?" Harry asked incredulously.

"Dunno..." Ron faltered, as a trace of hope lifted his heart.

"Unless you tell her, you can never be sure. How much longer do you want to wait?" Harry asked, sounding as concerned as he felt.

"Not forever, I guess?" Ron looked lost in thought, as he started rubbing his chin in concentration. "But, I can't *tell* her! It would be the end of our friendship if she says no. I don't reckon I can ever face her again."

"And you reckon you'll be able to face her everyday, when you know in your heart that you two could have been more than friends? Because, more than a possibility exists, Ron," Harry rationalized. "Take the example of my father for Godric's sake! He blurted his feelings to my mother in their seventh-year. He pretended not to like

her and was a total dolt,” Harry screwed up his face, remembering the memory from the Pensieve, “before confessing his feelings.”

Ron perked up as Harry continued his lecture. “When he finally confessed, Mum said yes, didn’t she? Their love is the stuff of legend now...” he paused, musing over that particular fact and his journey to his parents’ past. Whatever really did happen, he knew for a fact that Lily and James truly loved each other and nobody could prove otherwise. Everybody he knew could swear by it and now thinking about it, he almost felt stupid to get upset over the Snape incident in the memory. Lily didn’t *hate* James then, it was his immaturity that annoyed her.

At that time, his parents were young, just like Hermione and Ron were now. The cat-and-rat incident of their third-year when both of his best friends were at each other’s throat all the time zoomed past his mind. Not to mention the jealousy they both showed to Krum and Fleur respectively in their fourth-year. More than a possibility existed that both of his best friends could hit it off.

“Ron, you have to tell her how you feel, or you might just as well have to spend the rest of your life thinking: *what if.*”

Ron gulped, as if trying to swallow a huge lump of meat. He was gripping the arms of the chair as though they were his life-support and looked at Harry’s encouraging face. His funny grin reminded Harry of the one he always gave him when the Quaffle was in his scoring area and it was evident that he was going to block it.

*It’s now or never!* Ron thought determinedly.

When Harry saw Ron finally stand up firmly, he could very easily guess that Ron had won the battle with his heart. It didn’t seem appropriate to ruin this moment with some asinine comment, so he simply thumped Ron’s shoulder lightly and showed a thumbs-up sign.

Ron nodded and went straight for the stairs, not looking back. Harry stared at the retreating figure of his friend and felt a lingering but almost tangible emotion in the air.

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## CHAPTER 24 – Scrolls of Life

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Dumbledore's return was not only welcome but pivotal when it came to Harry's current predicament. There were so many questions in his mind that he thought it might burst if he didn't unload them all in front of the Headmaster.

However, as luck had it, when Dumbledore finally showed up at the head table for dinner one clear night of March, he was too engrossed in talking to the professors to pay any attention to Harry. Obviously, seeing the Headmaster in his usual place at the school, most of the students cheered and waved to him, which he acknowledged quite warmly. Still, Harry thought, he looked disconcerted for some reason.

Harry knew he would get his chance after dinner, which gave him plenty of time to reflect over the first clue provided, about what really was going on—even if it was from a very dubious source. He didn't have many eager sources knocking down his door; so he contented himself with the letter that Luna's father had sent her on her query about the Ventosus Scroll.

Yesterday, while he, Ron and Hermione were relaxing on their favorite spot near the lake, under the cool shade of a beech tree, they had been joined by Luna to mull over some new facts. At that time, Harry had been glaring at Ron, who hadn't confessed his feelings to Hermione; rather, he had somehow ended up rowing with her—yet again. Nevertheless, even a miffed Hermione joined in when Luna revealed what she had found out.

Harry had noted that things were shaping up slowly; only few loose jigsaw pieces remained of the puzzle to unveil the real mystery behind what Voldemort was actually up to and why a Hogwarts student wanted him dead.

His cast was taken off the day before yesterday, the same day he had been called upon by Snape for pinning the assault on Malfoy home. Harry hadn't budged, completely denying everything. He hadn't done anything, which was partly true as he really didn't know what had caused the transfiguration exactly. As a last resort, Snape

had used an advanced spell to trace all Harry's previous spell-work by his wand, coming up with nothing. Grasping at straws, he contented by hissing at him some more, which Harry sighed over patiently, while secretly enjoying a flabbergasted Potions Master. So, with a successful transfiguration hex on his belt and return of movement to his leg, he had been feeling positively alert and eager to solve the whole mystery.

Luna had informed them that besides working on the Quibbler, her father liked to read about Ancient Magical Cultures. His study was filled with books on exceptional and esoteric subjects. Random was the word Luna used for his collection. On her request, Mr. Lovegood had flitted across the oldest books he possessed, and had only been able to find one item that he thought was of any interest to them.

It seemed that there existed a legend of sorts about four scrolls—Scrolls of Life; the only reference he could find that was mystifying enough to fit their bill. According to Mr. Lovegood, there were too many Magical Scrolls in history to contend over and half of them were hoaxes anyway. The only thing that made him stop and go over the details of these particular scrolls was the mention of wind. The Scroll of Air was one of the four scrolls and Ventosus meant wind in ancient language.

There was not enough detail provided, but what he summarized from the text was that according to a long forgotten legend, there were four scrolls disseminated across the world and beyond, collectively called as the Scrolls of Life. The four scroll were of Air, Water, Earth and Fire. These scrolls entailed the secrets of these four elements, by the mixture of which everything had been made. Whoever had it could control the world by unlocking the secrets buried in these four scrolls. Legend had that each of these scrolls was heavily protected by mythical forces, which would come to life when the possession they guard was threatened. Moreover, like every other legend, there wasn't any actual proof of the Scrolls actually existing.

Harry wondered how the details of such legends found themselves in books when they weren't even solidly present somewhere. Perhaps, stories, all they were. Even then, Harry became quite thoughtful after hearing the facts. His dream-visions might have been a part of the

puzzle, if there was any grain of truth in this legend. Because he still remembered the magnanimous Griffin and its territorial screech; how possessively it had protected the Ventosus Scroll in the world of the broken sun, the same beast who had embraced his mother warmly and had given the scroll to her, willingly. What had happened to the scroll after that? He had to find out soon enough.

He was interrupted in his mulling by a thump on his arm; it was Ron, who was looking at him with strange eyes. The expression looked strange on Ron's face as it made his complexion pale and lips to stretch in a line.

"What's wrong, Ron?"

Harry felt another nudge at his arm by Hermione, who looked drawn and tight-lipped— unlike her as well.

They both were motioning him to stand up and he couldn't fathom why they were doing so. He finally got some clue, seeing the serious expressions on the faces of every student in his eye-range. Another peculiar thing about all of them was that they were all looking at him and the head table alternatively, as if they were too stunned to even whisper about what was going on.

Harry spun around and gasped, seeing the Minister of Magic, Madam Amelia Bones, staring right at him. She was grasping a gold medallion and looked gloomy enough to unsettle anyone. Mr. Weasley was standing right beside her, fidgeting with some papers and his spectacles.

In his pondering Harry had totally blocked the outside world. He hadn't even registered the entrance of Amelia Bones, the visit of whom he had been most dreading. The moment when he finally forgot about it, there she was, reminding him of the bitter truth: the loss of his godfather.

His mind exploded with bitter thoughts. Sirius didn't want an Order of Merlin, he only wanted his freedom; this was pretentious on the part of the Ministry, their late realization that the wizard they had labeled as being on the dark side—who they had hunted as a wild and rabid dog—had actually been a hero in disguise.



“Harry, you better hurry...”

It was Hermione, nudging him to do the right thing. And for few seconds, he really didn't want to do it. He didn't want to stand up but walk out of the Great Hall blocking everything that had happened to him. All the brightness he had been feeling waned away; he felt as if he was too tired, too frustrated for always choosing the right way. However, a voice similar to his mother spoke unintelligible but soothing words to him and he stood up slowly as if his muscles were having trouble, akin to an ill-serviced machine.

It seemed as if there was nobody present in the Great Hall, his footsteps echoed on the floor and Harry was overcome by flashbacks from his past.

*... Don't worry about me, I'm pretending to be a lovable stray ...*

*... I, spy for Voldemort? When did I ever sneak around people who were stronger than myself? ...*

*... I never betrayed James and Lily. I would have died before I betrayed them ...*

*... I don't know if anyone ever told you – I'm your godfather... Once my name's cleared... if you wanted a... a different home ...*

*... You are truly your father's son, Harry ...*

*... This is how it is... there are things worth dying for ...*

*... Be well, Harry, and take care of yourself ...*

His every step became leaden as he trudged towards the head table like a drugged husk. His throat prickled and vision blurred as the memories rushed past his eyes. He didn't dare to blink and looked upwards at the hovering candles for warding off the welling emotions.

He finally reached the raised platform and it felt to him as if years passed just to make that journey of few steps.

Dumbledore steered him towards Madam Amelia Bones, the pressure of his hand on his shoulder was more than comforting.

“Calm down, Harry,” he whispered to him.

Amelia Bones gave him an understanding look, while Mr. Weasley spoke up, “Harry James Potter, you are awarded the Order of Merlin: First Class, in behalf of your godfather, Sirius Black, who was imprisoned for erroneous reasons. It is—”

“I’ll take it from here, Arthur,” Amelia Bones said softly, and looked directly at Harry. Mr. Weasley looked relieved beyond words as he sidled beside Professor McGonagall.

Amelia Bones stood facing the student-body of Hogwarts, and it was then that Harry observed no reporter or photographer, snapping and scribbling away.

*It’s better this way,* he thought, taking few deep breathes.

“I can’t apologize enough to Mr. Potter for the errors that have been made. The Order of Merlin is only a token of gratitude from our part to the person who we judged wrongly. Even when we sent the Dementors of Azkaban on him, Sirius Black was not swayed into inactivity. He broke out of Azkaban only to uncover the real truth about Peter Pettigrew, for which we are very grateful.... He was a gem of a man, the reality of which we found out later. He’ll be remembered quite respectfully—a martyr in our eyes.”

She bowed her head and after a brief pause she handed Harry the golden medallion: the Order of Merlin, which Harry took with frozen hands, not even feeling its cool surface. His throat ached as he silently accepted the medal encased in a velvet box.

There was no applause, only dead silence. Harry closed the box and slid it into one of his inner robe pockets, as if longer connection with it would cause some unforeseen event.

Dumbledore cleared his throat to break the awkward silence and advised the students to return to their dinner as they needed their energy for the next day.

Harry was just about to step off the dais when Dumbledore stopped him. "Why don't you come with me, Harry?" he asked with a gentle voice.

"Er..." Harry felt somewhat disoriented, but he didn't interrupt Dumbledore who guided him towards his office. Harry could see Ron and Hermione fidgeting in their seats as if they would give anything to be able to be with him at that moment. He offered a meek smile to them, telling them he was all right. He left a buzzing Great Hall from professors' entrance along with Amelia Bones and Mr. Weasley.

"Dumbledore, I must return to the Ministry immediately. You know how things are. However, it's good to see you back."

Amelia Bones departed after being whispered to by Mr. Weasley, who turned towards Harry after reaching Dumbledore's office. As Dumbledore got busy with some documents on his table, Mr. Weasley stepped closer to him, and asked, "Are you all right, Harry?"

"I'm fine," Harry assured.

"I'm sorry about barging on you like this. As you know, the Minister had been due for quite some time. However, with her busy schedule and then Dumbledore's departure, things got delayed. I'm sure Molly would have kittens when she finds out about this...."

"You are all right, aren't you?" Mr. Weasley asked again, concernedly.

"I'm fine, Mr. Weasley. I just think this wasn't necessary. Sirius didn't get the free status when he was alive and I don't see any point of this new status; now that he's dead," he finished bitterly, a hard edge creeping into his voice.

"Harry..." Arthur Weasley hesitated, understanding that none of his consolatory comments would do any good. Still, he ploughed on, "Sirius had always been action. He went protecting the ones he loved just like your parents. Any of us would have done it. This is just how it is."

He patted his shoulder and moved towards the fireplace.

*This is how it is... there are things worth dying for...* Sirius's voice implored him in his mind.

Stiffly, Harry moved towards the window overlooking the Hogwarts grounds, shoving his hands in his trouser pockets.

"I'll be off now, Dumbledore," said Mr. Weasley, taking some Floo powder from a pot near the fireplace and giving Dumbledore a perplexed look.

"Goodbye, Arthur."

Mr. Weasley departed with another, "Goodbye."

"Harry, want to sit down?" Dumbledore asked gently, turning towards a rigid Harry.

Before sitting down on one of the chairs in front of Dumbledore's desk, Harry took out the Order of Merlin and placed it before Dumbledore. "I don't want this."

Dumbledore pierced him with his gaze, looking deeper as if reaching his soul. "This is an honor awarded to very few of us, Harry. Don't you think Sirius would have felt proud that you received it for him?"

Harry bowed his head as if contemplating. Raising his head, he said, "Can you keep it for me then? I don't want to see it; at least, not now."

"That, I can do," Dumbledore answered, letting the box remain where Harry had originally placed it.

"I heard rather alarming news about you, Harry."

Harry focused on Dumbledore and found him smiling at him, a twinkle showing through his half-moon spectacles.

"What news?"

"You turned a student into a Flobberworm. That is, Mr. Malfoy to be precise." Dumbledore gave a crooked smile.

“Oh that.” Harry hadn’t even remembered that he had done such a thing as he had been busy in piecing the scroll mystery together. “I don’t know how I did it, Professor.”

“I don’t agree on that fact. I think you know, you just haven’t realized it yet.”

“But—”

“Let me elaborate. Since last year, I’ve observed changes in you, Harry. They are not that marked, however they are there. As you’re growing old, you are becoming stronger and so are your powers. I don’t have to tell you that you possess exceptional skills; most of them are still dormant but they are present at your core. You are the only student I know who learned Occlumency in such a short duration and that is only the beginning when it comes to your acquired skills.

“However, your guard does go down whenever you are pressurized by Voldemort. You have to understand, Harry, he knows more about the connection between you two than anybody else. Even I don’t know the extent to that. Nevertheless, I have observed more developments in you this year, especially with your dreams.”

“I haven’t felt Voldemort’s presence like last year, Professor, except when I was transfiguring into my animal form...” Harry hesitated at this point, which Dumbledore filled with his own voice of reason.

“Yes, Minerva had been keeping me updated on your progress at Transfiguration. Your Animagus form has indeed proven that Voldemort has given you more than he ever wished he had.”

“Is it because I’m a Parseltongue?”

“I can only assume, Harry, I’m no expert. However, I can surmise that the giant python that you changed into was due to the transference of powers by Voldemort. You have to understand that Transfiguration is a complicated subject and human transfiguration, more so. You need all of your concentration while transforming and that leaves you with very less to guard your mind against his encroachments; you are indeed very much vulnerable in that state.

“You can assume that unless you master your transformation, every time you would transfigure, your mind would be assaulted by Voldemort, reaching deeper than before. I commend your decision for not going down that path.”

“I don’t want to do anything with Voldemort, Professor. I can’t bear the thought that the monster responsible for my parents and godfather’s death is connected to me somehow. If it was up to me, I would cut away that part of mine—power or not!”

Dumbledore nodded in understanding. “You have to accept the fact, Harry, that there lies your strength. Any of you could use the connection between both of you as a weapon. Perhaps too many factors cloud your mind right now; however, haven’t you wondered about your dreams, which are not dreams at all? They are either snatches of Voldemort’s memories or your mother’s. This new development or the combination, you might say, has given us more clues. Haven’t you realized that if you want you can go deeper in Voldemort’s mind as well? Don’t you remember that twelve-year-old Tom, who was tormented by Buxly?”

“I have realized this.” Harry looked at Dumbledore knowingly. “I know that the dream of Tom was a past memory of Voldemort’s, the smoky snake might be a guard of his for keeping any intrusion away. Still, once both the good and bad visions mingled, I just hoped that Voldemort didn’t know I was probing in his mind, even if it was unconsciously.”

As if another thought suddenly hit him, bringing along a feeling of dread. “Professor, Voldemort could be listening in!” Harry closed his eyes and concentrated hard for achieving the perfect state of occlusion.

“You don’t have to worry about that. After last year’s turmoil, I have cast some more security spells at Hogwarts. Only those who *should* be present in the premises can enter the castle, my office specifically. Nevertheless, I can’t say it’s totally failsafe,” he said, stroking his beard thoughtfully.

“I really haven’t seen anything except few jumbled up dreams. I haven’t seen anything of what he’s planning to do. There *is* a nagging

feeling that something is about to go wrong, but nothing else. No details.” Harry looked at Dumbledore expectantly, asking with his eyes for some explanation.

Dumbledore stood up from his chair and made his way towards his Pensieve and loosened some silvery strands from his head. It was then that Harry noticed, Fawkes wasn’t present at his perch and the previous headmaster portraits were uncharacteristically silent as if totally tuned in for the next big thing.

Dumbledore turned around and looked at him gravely as if warning him beforehand that what he was about to hear, he wasn’t going to like one bit.

“I have found some disturbing things while I was away from Hogwarts, Harry. It seems that Voldemort has been looking for something that can make him almost invincible. From the way he’s operating, it is clearly evident that he knows quite clearly what he wants.”

“Lupin’s been telling me how Voldemort’s increasing his following in foreign countries. What’s he been up to in Romania? Why on earth he raided the Romanian Ministry?” Harry asked, puzzled.

“As it seems, Voldemort has been up to no good.” There was a gleam in his eyes offsetting his solemn expression. “He’s looking for something, I presume, might not even exist. Nonetheless, according to some weighty resources, it just may.”

“What is he looking for, Professor? The Scrolls of Life?” Harry asked.

Dumbledore looked at Harry with astonishment as if he had somehow killed his punch line. He sat back down his chair while his expression readily changed to an open smile. “I don’t know who your sources are, Harry, but they are excellent, I might add. I haven’t even briefed the Order about this and here you are, asking me about the Vita Scrolls that has been puzzling me, while taking all the energy of Voldemort’s.”

It was Harry’s turn to be amazed. “He *is* looking for the scrolls? The same scrolls of Earth, Water, Air and Fire?”

Dumbledore nodded in agreement. "Another name for the Vita Scrolls."

"Has he been raiding all these historical places all over the world just to get information on these scrolls? Is this connected to the mysterious deaths of Muggles in Egypt?"

"He certainly is. It has been confirmed." Dumbledore nodded.

Harry suddenly remembered the Death Eaters' screams as they were killed by the Griffin guarding the Ventosus scroll and everything suddenly fit. He didn't even bother to ask whether the confirmation had been provided by their Potion's Master. He was more excited over the vision he saw in which Voldemort had tortured Avery. There was only one Death Eater who had escaped from the Ventosus vault, and it could have just been Avery.

"A knut for your thoughts?" Dumbledore said, bringing Harry back to reality, which was the cue for him to spill it all in front of the wise headmaster.

Harry started with the dream of Ursula Weasley and how it had turned into Voldemort's memories; then the aftereffects of his transformation, how he woke up to a vision of his parents and watched the world with the broken sun through his mother's eyes. He told him all about how Sirius's diary had helped him see his parents' past; the way they had gotten the Ventosus Scroll and how one of his previous vision of Voldemort torturing Avery made sense after that, as Voldemort had said that, he hadn't even been able to handle few rookies which his parents and godfather had been at that time.

"You are doing your own version of Legilimency, Harry. You are seeing into the mind of Voldemort." Dumbledore looked pleased. "You are finding your own way, and in your terms."

"But I think Voldemort knows I've been inside his mind and maybe that's why I haven't seen anything after that."

"Yes, he might be blocking you but that doesn't mean the way is closed forever."



“Do you know about Ursula Weasley?” Harry asked curiously.

“She was before my time, but I’ve heard that she was very powerful. One of the greatest witches of our times; she didn’t get much recognition because of her mysterious death. Interestingly enough, Ginevra Weasley is the first girl born after Ursula Weasley into the Weasley family.”

“Ginny?” Harry didn’t know what to say.

“Yes.” Dumbledore smiled knowingly.

Harry suddenly changed the subject, showing his deliberation on the student who was after his neck. There were three students that he suspected, one of whom he had discarded recently. Dumbledore wanted to know the identity of the discarded suspect; however, Harry didn’t mention Cho’s name as it would have been useless, he was sure that she wasn’t *it*. That left him with Malfoy and Colin Creevey.

It had occurred to Harry that he could be wrong in his observation but he had come up with these names after a lot of thought process. Malfoy was the safe bet, as he had made his intentions quite public; he was only waiting for the opportune time to strike. Harry was only suspicious about Colin Creevey; something just didn’t fit right in his case. He even felt ashamed for including Colin in his list but he had no other choice. Colin had indeed been acting strange all year long; it could have been the effect of his brother’s death, but his behavior had been nothing but peculiar.

Dumbledore was very much astonished on his observation. He looked at him with wary eyes and Harry had the strange feeling as if he was too tired to handle all this. He certainly looked worn-out.

“Harry, perhaps, it’s his trauma speaking? However, what you have told me cannot be classified as being normal. I’ll look over it. I still have the feeling that there’s someone we’ve looked over. Mr. Malfoy couldn’t possibly plan another attack unless he’s fully backed by his father’s Death Eater acquaintances. Nonetheless, I will increase the surveillance on both of them in particular and every House entrance in general.”

That settled, Harry became worried on another issue. "Is Ventosus scroll with the Ministry?" he asked the burning question at last.

"No." Dumbledore shook his head, taking off his spectacles. "I'm certain that it isn't with the Ministry. I didn't know that James, Lily and Sirius had done such a thing. They hadn't even mentioned this in their wills or their letters to me." He stroked his beard thoughtfully, a distant look on his face.

Harry felt disappointed, hearing this. He was sure that Dumbledore would have known what had happened to the scroll. Why hadn't his parents told someone about it? The Order's founder would have been a safe bet.

Another thought occurred to him. "If you give me permission, Professor, I think I could find the scroll... or at least try."

"Harry, you know you can't just go off to some place. You're not of age; moreover, your security is of utmost importance."

"I know and that's why I'm asking your permission, Professor. I think I can find where it is," Harry rushed on in an excited voice, "At least, I have a hunch. I think it's in my parent's vault at Gringotts."

Dumbledore smiled at him. "I *am* getting old. Your hunch might turn out right. I'll send Hagrid—"

"I want to go, Professor," Harry pleaded, "I wouldn't even mind the usual guard. I need to see it for myself."

"Harry, it's against—"

"It's important!"

Dumbledore drew out his hands to silence him. "I can see that. All right. However, there's a condition. That you'll stay with the guard and would not saunter off to any other place at Diagon Alley."

"I promise! I wouldn't even face the Knockturn Alley."

After taking Headmaster's leave, as Harry was closing the office door shut, he distinctly heard Dumbledore chuckle. "I must be getting old, how else he could have wormed that permission out of me?"

Grinning, Harry made the journey back to his dormitory room. A feeling of relief swept over him. Things were finally piecing together; he could almost see a vague picture forming.

Not finding Ron, Hermione or even Ginny in the common room, he made his way straight to his room, finding it swamped in darkness. The usual candles weren't lighted which was not the only thing out of the ordinary. He could almost feel someone else in the room and he was ready to bet that it wouldn't turn out to be one of his roommates.

His wand was out in a flash. "*Lumos!*"

Harry wasn't much amazed at his discovery. "Colin, what do you thing you're doing?" he asked, sharply.

-x-X-x-

## Chapter 25 – Detour at Gringotts

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Harry stared at Colin in disbelief as he toppled to the floor in a crumpled heap.

“Colin!” Harry hurried towards his falling body. He didn’t know what Colin had been doing in his room, but he sure would like to find out.

“Harry!” Ron and Ginny burst into the room just then, closely followed by Hermione.

They could only see the faint silhouette of Harry with his *Lumos* wand hovering uncertainly over Colin’s body. Harry turned towards them in confusion as they stared at the stunned body. As if on reflex, they all started to explain simultaneously why they were there, where they had been and what they had found, along with lighting their wands.

Harry wanted Dumbledore to enter his room and utter in his authoritative voice, “Silence!” even if it was wishful thinking.

Hermione filled in for the Headmaster and shut the babbling Ron and fidgety Ginny to silence, with, “Would you two calm down? *Honestly!*” She lit the torches and candles of the room and stared at Harry, silently asking for an explanation.

In the light, the scene looked more melodramatic. Colin was lying senseless on the floor, while Harry guiltily hovered over the body.

“I didn’t do anything,” said Harry, simply.

“We are not blaming you, mate,” Ron assured, and swooped down to check Colin’s pulse. “He’s fainted, I reckon.”

Hermione double-checked and made sure of any other indications but got none. Colin seemed just out cold.

“Maybe you scared him to death?” Ron cracked, and received disapproving glares from the girls and a half-smile from Harry.

Ginny took out the Marauder's Map from her robe pocket and pointed towards it. "Well... we got a little worried after your departure from the Great Hall; so we took the map out of your trunk and used it. We had been guarding Dumbledore's office entrance until—"

"Filch arrived and we had to scam." Ron made a face.

"And just as we dodged the tailing Mrs. Norris, we saw that you were out of the office already. So we moved towards a short-cut, seeing later that Colin was already examining your room," Hermione finished.

Harry shook his head in frustration. "I dunno what he was doing here... It was dark when I entered the room, but I felt that there was someone else here. And I somehow knew that it couldn't be Ron, Neville, or even Dean or Seamus." Harry shrugged his shoulders.

"As soon as I lit my wand and saw Colin, he was already falling into a heap. I didn't even stun him!" Harry sounded perplexed.

He was aware of the dormant powers in him that he had first tasted in his human transfiguration class. He tested it on Malfoy—not voluntarily—but still it had produced the desired results. Had he involuntarily stunned Colin because of his own shock of seeing a person flitting through his things? Was he responsible for this? Honestly, he didn't know.

"We better take care of him," Hermione said worriedly, looking towards Ginny.

She got the signal and conjured a stretcher.

At that exact moment, Dean and Seamus entered the room and their chatter died down, as they looked at the slumped body of Colin's, hovering above the ground in a stretcher guided by Hermione and Ginny.

"It's a long story, you two. Why don't you help us carry him and we'll fill you in on what exactly happened?" Hermione offered, and winked at Harry.

Harry was more than grateful of this gesture. What he didn't need right now was more questions about the mysterious appearance of a junior Gryffindor in their room.

"Look, that drawer is open." Ginny whispered to Harry, before moving out of the room, indicating towards the side-table near his four-poster. The same drawer, in which he had sealed all his sixteenth birthday gifts, except for the orange globe that Dumbledore had gifted him.

He checked and saw that everything was still there, along with the mirror that Sirius had given him. However, the contents looked strewn, as if hurriedly shoved back inside. "I can't think of a single reason why Colin would go through this, unless he's the one plotting to kill me," Harry said uncertainly, not wanting to believe what his common sense was telling him.

"I don't think so, mate," Ron said, doubtfully. "You are his hero, Harry. How could he plot to kill you?"

"Then what was he doing in here?" Harry indicated towards the foe-glass and Sirius's mirror and even his diary.

"I dunno... He doesn't look the type, that's all I'm saying. It doesn't match," Ron concluded, vaguely.

"That reminds me. I don't see anything special going on between you and Hermione."

Ron flushed. "I—I... I'll ask her tomorrow. It's the Hogsmeade weekend, remember?" Seeing Harry roll his eyes, Ron continued, "I swear, I'll tell her tomorrow."

"Yeah, riiight." Harry shook his head derisively. "What happened the last time you were all fired up for it?"

"She started talking about the history of scrolls, and I just lost it."

-X-

Harry awoke to a dim room. The twilight sky welcomed him as he opened his eyes. He hadn't dreamt and the sleep had been short and

peaceful. He felt refreshed after a long time. His limbs were moving and he was not injured.

*Good thing, that*, he thought, ruefully, sliding out of his four-poster.

As it was quite early, everyone else was sleeping quite peacefully; soft snores punctuated the air, while the morning light tried to penetrate the bed curtains of his roommates.

After freshening up and putting on his school robes, Harry stretched elaborately. No one was awake still, and he realized that this was a great time to relocate some sensitive stuff out of his drawer.

So he took out the Foe-glass, Sirius's diary and mirror and placed it into the inside pocket of his invisibility cloak, and then shrunk the cloak to fill one of the inside pockets of his school-robe. With a second thought, he took out the mirror that Lupin had given him and made for downstairs.

As he had predicted, the Gryffindor common room was totally deserted and he had more than an hour before it started to fill with students.

He plopped down on his favorite couch and took out the mirror, calling out, "Remus Lupin!"

He was about to call the second time when Lupin's tired, but totally awake face peered out of the mirror. "Harry? Up so early?"

"I should ask you the same thing." Seeing Lupin fidget, Harry concluded, "On an Order mission?"

Lupin's smile answered his query. "We'll be meeting up today, Harry. Dumbledore told me that you were very insistent on going to Gringotts. Was it because of that dream you had?"

"Yeah, I think... No, I'm sure that I will find it in my vault."

"The Air Scroll... Are you sure, Harry? The Order could always do that for you—"

“No, you don’t understand. I want to do it myself; see it for myself...”

“Harry—”

“I did not call to talk about this, Lupin,” Harry said edgily. “I wanted to find out about what kind of work my parents did.”

“Didn’t Dumbledore tell you that they were Unspeakables?”

“He did, but I want to find out more... Do you know how many worlds they explored? Was it one or more than one?” Harry asked urgently, remembering the world of the broken sun, and about the unknown destinations of the Scrolls of Earth, Water, and Fire, which according to Dumbledore were scattered around worlds.

“Harry, you know what happened in the last years... even when they joined forces, they were not allowed to divulge whatever they did to outsiders, not even to their friends. When we found out that Voldemort was bent on finding your parents, we distrusted each other. Sirius thought I was the sneak while I had my doubts over him and Peter. Obviously, Peter saved himself because he seemed so harmless and devoid of any intellect....

“How wrong we were about him, I realize that now.” Lupin’s face creased with disgust. “I think you know more than me, Harry. You have Sirius’s diary; you can go and find out. Sirius quit early on, but still during their training he was usually assigned with them.”

“Sirius quit!” Harry’s eyes dilated in shock.

“He drifted out of it. He told us that he wasn’t interested anymore. But the unofficial reason was that he wanted to work for the Order, *fulltime*. His training as an Unspeakable had always been an asset to him.”

“Is that—” Harry faltered, hearing a rustle and a gasp just behind him. Swiftly, he hid the mirror in his robe and turned to find Crookshanks making his way towards him. However, it was not Crookshanks who had made that sound; it was Ginny, who now looked mortified, standing near the girls’ dormitory’s entrance.



Crookshanks must have startled her, while making his way to the common room. The ginger fur ball of a cat sauntered towards him leisurely and started rubbing himself against his legs.

“I didn’t mean to eavesdrop...” Ginny stuttered, while a flush rose in her cheeks. She seemed to Harry, a little girl who had just been caught stealing cookies from the cookie jar.

“How long—” Harry started, “How long have you been standing there?”

The flush deepened as, Ginny mumbled, “Er... from Gringotts?”

Harry sighed. “Just don’t tell anyone about it.”

“I wouldn’t... You can count on me, Harry.”

These simple words did wonders for Harry. It produced a genuine smile out of him. “Er... Thanks.”

Harry did a double take and stared at Ginny. As she plodded into the common room, he noted that the black circles that he had depicted to be shadows across her face were in fact prominent black-circles around her eyes.

“Can’t sleep?” he asked.

Ginny sat across Harry with her eyes downcast. “Yeah... I keep on having these nightmares—” she cutoff, realizing too late that she had spilled more than she ever wanted to.

“Go on,” Harry urged.

“They are very incoherent; so I dunno what they really mean, but I keep on seeing this inferno... This huge inferno rising from some place....”

Harry was more than interested. He remembered his dream of the smoky snake; the way it always tried to sting him. “Maybe it’s OWLs stress?”

"I guess." She didn't meet his eyes.

Crookshanks, after romping around the common room, jumped up and curled up on Ginny's lap. She, in turn, patted him affectionately.

It was then that Harry realized: he and Ginny were all alone in the common room. This awareness sent butterflies fluttering in his stomach.

"Why are you going to the Diagon Alley?" Ginny asked, curiously.

He thought of making an excuse. Ginny knew a few of the developments, but not all of them. However, looking at her, propped serenely on the chair across from him, he blurted out the truth. "I need to fetch something important from my vault."

She glanced at him inquisitively as if scanning for a catch, she didn't get any.

Changing the subject, Harry asked what first came to his mind, "How's Colin?"

From Ginny's expression, it was quite evident that something serious had happened. Her forehead momentarily creased with worry as she hesitated before finally speaking. "Even Madam Pomfrey doesn't know what's wrong with him..."

"What?" Harry couldn't believe his ears. "Wasn't he simply stunned?"

"What's wrong with him?"

Ginny took a deep breath, and continued, "According to Madam Pomfrey, it is some advanced magic. He *is* stunned but somehow can't be enervated. Obviously a basilisk couldn't be lurking around your room, so that's out of question." She looked at him curiously. "Madam Pomfrey has requested Mandrake's Potion from Professor Sprout and that would be the last resort for Colin."

Harry felt guilty for some reason. Did Colin get stunned because of his unknown powers? Could he use it even without knowing?

“Harry, it isn’t your fault,” said Ginny, looking at his worried expression. “He was the one snooping around your room, not vice versa.”

Harry was just thinking of something witty to say, when a few fifth-year girls showed up from their stairway. They giggled seeing Harry alone with Ginny. They, in turn, increased their distance by sliding in the opposite directions as if hit by an electric bolt. Crookshank’s comfort was frayed; he huffily stalked off towards a lonesome chair in the corner and curled up on it.

*There goes another chance*, Harry thought, dully. He looked at Ginny’s back as she stood up to leave the common room, probably with her classmates.

*What are you doing? Shouldn’t you ask her out to Hogsmeade?* his mind screamed at him.

Reflexively, he bolted towards her. “Ginny?”

She turned around and looked at him warily. Her brilliant brown eyes seemed to question his motives.

“Would you go to Hogsmeade with me?” he blurted out in one breath.

Ginny’s breath caught in her throat as her face split with a surprised smile. “Yes...” She looked down, while brushing some loose hair behind her ear.

Harry’s heart thumped painfully in his chest. Adrenaline rushed throughout his body as he grinned stupidly at her. He was totally oblivious to the fifth-year girls who were giggling non-stop.

Ginny left the common room with a red face while Harry settled on a couch—he never liked, as it sagged—totally unconscious of the students that milled about him. Ron and Hermione soon joined him and he snapped out of his reverie after many nudges from the ruffled pair to tell them what he planned to do.

“Are you insane, Harry? You could get killed! Kidnapped—”

“Hermione, relax, a few Order members will be with me—”

Ron wasn't even swayed, as he quickly asked, "We are coming - right?"

Harry's face fell. "Er... I dunno..."

"We can't let you go alone! We'll go with you," Hermione insisted, while Ron nodded along.

"It's out of my hands." Harry shrugged uncomfortably.

Hermione sighed derisively. "This is the last time we are letting you go somewhere alone, Harry." She folded her arms. "And I mean it!"

"Put your hair *on*. I'll be fine."

Hermione looked on disapprovingly, while Ron tried his best to be normal and whisper dueling strategies in his ear.

As an afterthought, Harry elbowed Ron and cocked his head at Hermione. Just as he had predicted, Ron still hadn't ask her out for the Hogsmeade trip.

"Hermione," Harry turned towards her, while Ron kicked him below the table, but to no avail, "you're not planning to spend the afternoon in the library, are you?"

Hermione narrowed her eyes. "No. I was thinking of—"

"Why don't you go with Ron?" Harry chirped uncharacteristically. Ron colored and Hermione raised her eyebrow.

It was Harry's turn to painfully poke his best mate.

"Yeah, Hermione... Will you..." Ron's ears flamed red as he stuttered.

"Yes, Ron," Hermione said in a business manner.

However, Harry noted that there was nothing businesslike about the smile that she tried best to hide, but couldn't.

-x-

After breakfast, Professor McGonagall swooped in on the Gryffindor table in the Great Hall, startling most of the students. However, to the relief of the House, her attention was completely fixed on Harry Potter.

"That's the signal, Harry," Hermione said, looking towards the tall and upright figure of their Head of House.

"Not that we could look over that steely glare," Ron muttered, while Hermione shushed him.

Harry stood up and waved a final goodbye to them. He was quite disappointed at not finding Ginny among them, even when she had been one of the early risers.

However, all the thoughts of Ginny raced out of his mind, as he was beckoned by Professor McGonagall, "Come on, Mister Potter."

She guided him towards Dumbledore's office, where he was happy to see, Lupin, Tonks, and Kingsley. Tonks greeted him with her usual, "Wotcher, Harry!", while Lupin and Kingsley nodded at him.

"This is still quite unusual, Harry," said Dumbledore, attracting his attention. "Just promise me that you'll remain with the group, come hell, water, or Death Eaters?"

"I promise." Harry had no intention of doing anything foolish. He wanted to get to the bottom of this whole mystery, and fast.

-X-

Harry's unruly hair whipped around his face, as he looked at the many stone passageways of Gringotts bank; however, the journey was so fast that he couldn't glimpse a single detail except for a blur of flame torches streaking past their cart along the uneven and unending tunnels.

The journey from Dumbledore's office to Diagon Alley had gone quite smoothly for Harry. Fawkes had transported him along with his *guard* in a flash of orange flames. It had been more relaxing than a Portkey journey. He had only felt weightlessness for a moment and in a flash he had been standing in a quiet, dark alleyway of Diagon Alley.

Harry had been so ready for an ambush that seeing no suspicious hooded figures near the Gringotts bank almost disappointed him. He was glad that none of his escorts knew Legilimency.

Their Goblin guide today was Griphook. Harry had smiled at him in recognition, only to receive a blank stare in return.

Maybe these goblins were taught to be discreet? Harry had shrugged, and holed up in the cart along with his guard. It was a miracle that the three in question—Kingsley, Lupin, and Tonks—had fit in the tiny cart somehow. Griphook had sat beside him across from the three stuck adults, who looked quite uncomfortable. Tonks had specifically gone bald for the cart-travel to save her and her neighbors' eyes. Kingsley didn't have to worry over such hairy matters. Lupin on the other hand had closed his eyes for the occasion.

Harry became alert seeing the familiar underground lake, decorated with huge stalagmite and stalactites. The cart shuddered to halt beside his vault and Griphook slid out, totally unruffled and trooped onwards. Tonks was helped out by Lupin and they both took a while to steady their breaths, Tonks more so. Kingsley looked ready as go.

With an angry green hiss, Harry's family vault opened up to reveal his usual fortune. Harry could almost swear that his fortune had increased almost twofold since the last time he had been there. The sparkling Galleons, Sickles, and Knuts, however, weren't able to hold his attention, as he plunged into the vault, looking for something else altogether. Griphook looked questioningly at the Order members who stood guard outside the vault—Lupin, peering in, standing just beyond the vault door, while Kingsley and Tonks maintained an outside lookout—without uttering a single word.

Harry went crazy and started looking around for something mysterious, something ominous, anything at all.

This was the first time that Harry actually saw the vault's back, which was filled with yet more golden Galleons. The middle heap looked higher than the rest of the columns, so he disturbed it, digging into the stacked coins with his hands. He could almost feel the angry glare of Griphook's on his back for making a mess of his vault, but it was his money wasn't it? It was his to make a mess of, right?

He nodded his head to answer his own questions, and continued his pitch. Just as he was about to leave the central heap, his hand touched a cold and uneven surface.

Lupin understood Harry's elated expression as he came closer to help him with the digging. With few more strokes, they were able to expose an extremely old chest. It was carved out of a single huge rock, sealed by magical means.

Harry and Lupin shared grins. They could almost feel that they had come to some juncture. However, all the elation withered down when they tried to lift the chest. It was quite heavy, and they simply couldn't do it.

Seeing their struggle, Kingsley and Tonks joined them as well.

"Maybe we ought to open it as it is?" Kingsley suggested, after he had tried his hand on it.

Harry was totally exhausted from all the digging and trying at lifting. The humid air of the vault was a part of it as well, which was making them perspire heavily.

Lupin wiped his brow and tried the easiest spell first. *"Alohamora!"*

Nothing happened.

*"Apertio!"* Lupin looked at Kingsley and Tonks.

*"Effringo!"*

*"Erumpo!"*

*"Patesco!"*

No response.

Kingsley, Tonks, and Lupin, all looked at Harry for some input.

He said what came to him first. "Open up!"

The adults exhaled air and exchanged looks. While Harry disappointedly thought, *The blundering Boy-Who-Lived, who'll save the whole magical community... Can't even open a silly old chest. What a joke!*

"There are no markings whatsoever on this chest," said Tonks, examining the chest closely. "It's not even apparent what kind of magic sealed it."

Harry ran all the Unicorns of his mind, but came up with nothing. He looked helplessly at the guard with the realization that this chest could contain what he came looking for.

"You knew my parents, Remus... Can't you think of any intimate term that they used between them?"

"Well, Marauders what comes to mind, but Lily wasn't part of it." Lupin tried "Prongs!" on the chest. The old chest kept shut dully.

After thinking it over, Lupin suggested, "Can't you remember anything from the dreams or memories that you've been seeing?"

It was this comment which struck Harry. Maybe he knew something after all. With a hint of dread and veiled excitement, Harry repeated the words, which for some time had even mystified himself.

*"Let those who rest more deeply sleep,*

*Let those awake their vigils keep..."*

The chest shuddered, and with a loud thunk the stone chest opened, issuing white brilliant fumes. Harry's couldn't see the contents of the chest as he slid back in shock, seeing the two tiny projected gossamer figures, just above the chest. It seemed as if the opening of the chest had awakened them.

As the image cleared, everybody gasped.

Harry's heart jumped in his chest as he realized who those tiny figures were. He was suddenly reminded of the time Dumbledore had told him about the prophecy; how the projected image of Professor



Trelawney over the swirling contents of the Pensieve had told him about his future destiny.

The two figures in question, however, were his parents, Lily and James Potter. They stood hand in hand looking at a specific point in front of them.

“Harry,” his mother started, “if you have found this. It means that we are not among the living... I hope you are all right, my son.” Lily gave a dry sob and Harry’s heart went out to her.

He watched them hungrily, not even blinking, as the emotions welled in his heart, totally oblivious to the three Order members huddled close beside him.

James pressed Lily’s shoulder, as he started, “This chest contains a very important piece of a powerful puzzle, and shouldn’t in any way find its way in the hands of Voldemort.” James’s expressions became grave, as he continued on, “This is the Ventosus Scroll, a part of the Vita Scroll. Lily acquired it after bonding with a mystical Griffin. We swore that we wouldn’t let it fall in the wrong hands and so we protected it just as we protected you from harm’s way.”

“Dumbledore must have informed you about what’s to come next and we feel awful that we are not there beside you.” Pure pain punctuated Lily’s voice.

“I hope that you are well, Harry. You were vibrant from day one, grasping my thumb as if to break my bones—”

“James!”

“And you do play Quidditch - right?”

“*James Harry Potter!*” Lily bellowed, while James smiled and winked at Harry.

“We love you, son. Just remember that!” said James, his face quite serious.

“Yes, we love you more than life itself.” His mother blew him a kiss.

*"You don't have to tell me,"* Harry whispered to himself, as their image started wavering. He thought it was because of his tears but blinking them back, he found that the message was ending.

"Protect the scroll, Harry." James' voice echoed in the vault, and the cloud of white fumes on which their images were projected dispersed to reveal the Ventosus Scroll inside the chest.

Harry took it out carefully, and shrank it to fit in his robe-pocket, not even opening it. Lupin looked at him solemnly and Harry nodded towards him, taking a deep ragged breath.

Both of them made for the entrance, where Kingsley, Tonks, and Griphook were waiting for them.

-X-

*Come out! Come out, wherever you are! You are not getting any further from here, Potter.*

*This is your last day on this earth!* He smiled his first satisfactory smile in months.

-x-X-x-

## Chapter 26 – Taken by Surprise

---

He could still remember how his sister had fallen to the ground, motionless, lifeless after the attack...

He still remembered how happy she had looked at her wedding, which hadn't even seen its first Anniversary.

And now she was no more...

With a mere flick of a wand, after a shot of spell, she lay dead in front of him. Still. Unmoving. Dead.

Her obituary published in the Daily Prophet flickered past his eyes...  
*Dearly loved young wife, daughter, sister, who will be missed very much...*

A fiery rage gripped him as he centered on the reason, why all that had happened. Why he was enslaved to do what he was doing. How he had so much responsibility, suddenly.

*That Potter!*

*The root of my all problems will have to DIE!*

*"Now, now, let's not be hasty, child."* A familiar voice hissed in his mind.

*Yes, master,* he answered obediently.

*"There are more interesting events awaiting Potter than death. Don't you agree?"* the voice implored.

*Yes, my Dark Lord. Indeed.*

Michael Corner blended into the crowd of the Death Eaters, awaiting Potter and his guard's appearance outside Gringotts.

-X-

Harry had been so busy being happy that he didn't even notice the uncharacteristic silence as he stepped out of Gringotts; however, his guards were quite tuned in as they promptly took out their wands and got ready for anything unexpected.

Harry faltered at the steps of Gringotts, seeing the empty streets of Diagon Alley, and it was then that he noticed four looming Dark Marks, hovering sinisterly above them. The sunlight passed through the gossamer skulls, making their emerald profile, more prominently grotesque.

All the shops were closed and he could easily see a few eyes peeking from the curtained windows of visible shops. His guard stood alert beside him for the approaching onslaught.

Goblins, seeing the outside development, sealed the bank shut. What more could anybody expect of the extra careful Goblins? Harry thought, ruefully. Still, he was content that he had taken out the Ventosus Scroll in time. Whatever happened, he was not going to let it slip into the filthy hands of the Death Eaters.

What ensued after was nothing but pure chaos.

A hoard of Death Eaters—just as Harry had predicted—swarmed around the bank as if they wanted it razed today. With their appearance, they started sending hexes towards them as if there was no tomorrow.

*“Reducto!”*

*“Petrificus Totalus!”*

*“Crucio!”*

*“Relashio!”*

*“Incendio!”*

*“Incarcerous!”*

***“CRUCIO!”***

The guard instantly covered Harry from every angle; however he tried to squirm away. They conjured shields and huddled in a circle, while returning the favor of spells through the small cracks between the shields. Every hex sent ricocheted off the shields with loud bangs, producing more noise.

“Stay put, Harry,” said Kingsley, under his breath.

“I don’t want to!” he bellowed irately.

“You don’t need to do anything,” Tonks yelled above the hubbub.

Harry understood her meaning as another crowd joined the melee, covering the banded Death Eaters. Their badges indicated that most of them were Ministry Aurors, while the rest of them were Order members. The incoming batch surrounded the Death Eaters in another tight circle. Harry could clearly see the most of the Order members; except for Moody, Twins, Mr. and Mrs. Weasleys, every Order member was present, including Bill and Charlie.

The curses and hexes stopped suddenly as the Death Eaters felt the authoritative presence of the lawmakers. The silence was broken by a very smug laugh.

“What d’you think, we are scared?”

The Death Eaters parted to let Bellatrix Lestrange come forward. Her mask was lying askew about her neck; her black eyes glittered with malice at them.

Harry glared at her with hatred. He wanted to lash out with whatever power Dumbledore had told him about, and finish her off. She seemed *that* loathsome to him.

Registering Harry’s glare, Bellatrix crooned, “We still outnumber you.” A playful smile trespassed on her lips. “Give up the scroll and we may let you go.”

“Always the discord bringer, Bellatrix,” Lupin returned with an artificial smile.

"I wasn't speaking to you, you were-filth!" Bellatrix spat. "Give me the scroll, boy, and I'll let your friends go." She was looking directly at Harry.

Harry looked at her confused; still, a dread was already settling over his heart. His uneasiness was confirmed as the Death Eaters parted again to reveal the limp figures of Fred and George Weasley. They were unconscious, heavily bruised, and their hands were tied behind their backs.

Harry could see Bill and Charlie stepping forward in agitation, but they were stopped by their fellows.

*"Are they dead?"* Harry whispered his dread.

Lupin growled in frustration, while Harry's face set in a grim line. He was stopped from stepping out of the circle by the strong hand of Kingsley Shacklebolt. He shook his head at Harry for not going for the bait.

"No, Potter, they're not dead... But they will be, if you don't give us the scroll!" Bellatrix provided, highly enjoying his frustration.

Harry sighed in relief. "Why d'you want it so badly?"

"It's none of your concern, Potter!" Another hooded figure joined Bellatrix. His voice sounded more than familiar.

"Always meddling in things that don't matter to you. You *are* your parents' child, indeed."

"Avery!" Harry exclaimed, putting two and two together.

Avery took off the mask and Harry instantly recognized him. He was the same man who had prostrated himself in front of Voldemort to be saved in his vision. After saving himself from some rookies—

"You were the one who survived the Guardian Griffin! It was you, who lost the scroll to my parents!"

Avery stared curiously at Harry. "Bright too."

Harry looked at him in disbelief as he understood his own vision. It had been about the day when his parents and Sirius had chucked away the Ventosus scroll out of Death Eaters' fingers.

"Avery, have you lost your marbles?" Bellatrix shouted at him.

"No, Bella, not at all. I'm just thinking that we are going to kill them anyway. Why not tell them the reason after all?"

All the scorn that she had been showering at Harry was acutely transferred towards Avery, as Bellatrix glowered at him unbelievably. "What are you trying to be? A decent Death Eater? For Salazar's sake, snap out of it!"

Lupin straightened up and quickly exchanged few words with others. He nudged Harry to keep Avery and Bellatrix occupied. He tried to give him his shield but Harry shook his head. Professor Flitwick had already taught him that.

Grasping his own conjured shield, he took two steps forward. "If you are arguing about the Vita Scroll, I already know."

Bellatrix and Avery both looked shocked as they exchanged looks.

"Your old headmaster still has few sparks left, I see," said Bellatrix, her lip curling to a half-smile.

"Then you must know why we need it. Are you ready to give your life for it?" asked Avery.

"There won't be any need of that!" Kingsley jumped in.

Ignoring Kingsley, Bellatrix continued, "Scared, are you now, Potter?" She goaded, "Scared, that I'd kill you too, just like my worthless cousin?"

Harry saw red, as he thrashed within himself to subdue his bubbling anger.

"She's luring you in, Harry. Don't listen to her!" Lupin reasoned with him.

“Bugger off, Lupin! You can’t play Prefect now.

“C’mon, Harry, let me help you get out of all your sniveling miseries.” Bellatrix gave into her shrieking laughter.

Her laughter seemed to magnify, as every thread of reason slipped away from Harry. It seemed that there was only him and Bellatrix standing on the empty street of Diagon Alley. He felt warm, as if surrounded by a heavy mist.

The guard felt the sudden rise of temperature as well, as they stepped closer and looked at Harry for some clue. Death Eaters, smelling trouble shifted to another forming, and tried to step back from their original places. That gave the surrounding Aurors and Order members the signal to start dueling with them. They were encroaching on their area after all.

Just as the curses and hexes continued again, being shouted at the top of voices; the air shifted uneasily as a gossamer yet invisible force lashed towards Bellatrix. She wasn’t aware of it and was still sneering at Harry. But his guard felt it, because it whooshed past them, heading straight for her.

However, at that exact time, with a lightening blaze and a screech of Phoenix, Dumbledore materialized at the bottom step of Gringotts, and conjured a shield which absorbed the wave of energy that had shot out of Harry.

“No, Harry, this is not how you should use it,” he uttered gravely.

The dueling melee was quite busy in noticing another arrival even if it had been quite brilliant as Dumbledore’s. Harry returned to his normal-self as he saw Dumbledore’s conjured shield crumbling to the ground.

“Professor—”

“Dumbledore! Couldn’t resist the urge to join the party?” Bellatrix asked coldly. She didn’t even register that Dumbledore had just saved her life.



“Yes, Bellatrix, I do love parties.” He smiled at her, his eyes devoid of humor.

As Bellatrix locked into a duel with Dumbledore, Harry looked for Avery; however, he was nowhere to be seen. Harry was glad when he saw the Order members finally breaking away the Death Eaters’ circle that protected the unconscious Weasley twins. Bill saw to the twins and levitated them out of the tramping feet of the duelers.

Harry was sure that he had just summoned his powers, but Dumbledore had somehow known and mediated to stop it. Why exactly? He didn’t stop to contemplate.

Shield in one hand, Harry stepped further—his guard didn’t stop him; they were already dueling two Death Eaters to one—to find Wormtail, Lucius Malfoy, or even Rodolphus Lestrage. However, the hooded figures that he exchanged few hexes and curses with, finally stunning them—none of their eyes widened in recognition, except with shock.

He felt his wand moving mechanically, as if his brain knew what spell was on his way so that his mouth shouted the counter before the shot spell even hit him. The shot spells cancelled each other without even hitting him.

Because of his search for particular Death Eaters, he didn’t register that someone had been following him, longer than few minutes, but months to be exact.

“No you don’t. *Impedimentia!*”

Harry spun around to see that Tonks had slowed down the figure of Michael Corner.

“Michael!” Harry was too stunned to say anything as things suddenly started to shift in place. One of the last puzzle pieces, finally in front of him. He stared at him in disbelief. He noted Michael’s Ravenclaw school robes; he was not sporting any Death Eaters paraphernalia, but he was definitely with them. Why else he would be there hexing him?

Tonks got busy with a pair of Death Eaters who were looking more than energetic, as if high on some drug.

“You were the one who opened the Gateway in Hogsmeade?” asked Harry, totally bewildered. There were more question roving inside his mind; like, how was he there in the first place, why he wanted to kill him, so on and so forth. However, solving the mystery was what Harry was actually after. So, he flashed his wand in a duel stance to confirm that he was not looking for chitchat alone.

By that time Michael had regained movement, and as the spell wore off he pointed his wand vehemently at Harry. His face was set with grim contempt, his eyes almost beady. “Yes, it was ME! Why don’t you die, Potter? Why don’t you?” He shot a Blasting Curse at him, which Harry deflected with his shield.

“But, why?” Harry asked. “I never did anything to you.”

“Never did anything?” Michael vacillated in anger. “You killed my sister! You ruined my family! You ruined my love-life! What more do you want of me!

“The Dark Lord was right. You use people and then throw them away. Just as you did with my Cho.”

“What! I didn’t kill anybody!” Harry looked shocked. “And I didn’t use Cho!”

“Always the charmer, Potter. Always the Hero. The Boy-Who-Lived, la de da! Kiss my feet and I’ll take you to heaven!” Michael spat bitterly. “All your fans, each and one of them is a deluded fool—”

“You’ve lost your mind, Corner. I never did anything to harm you.”

“And Professor Flitwick has a secret crush on you!” Michael said drolly. “You are such a lying bugger!

*“Incarcerous!”*

Harry countered the spell and looked dazedly at Corner. He couldn’t understand what he was playing at.

“You are a Ravenclaw! How could you join Voldemort?”—Michael’s eyes dilated with fear hearing the name—“You joined Dumbledore’s Army last year. What is wrong with you! What happened that you—”

Harry’s words seemed to prickle Michael, as his face suddenly split in confusion. He looked disoriented for a second, but soon the expression passed and his features hardened. “SHUT UP!” he roared, interrupting him.

“I know what you’re trying to do, Potter, but your mind games won’t work on me. I’m immune to them! The Dark Lord has given me many skillful gifts. I can change you into a raving banshee, if you really pushed me.”

“Why don’t you try?” Harry threatened, rounding upon him.

“*Crucio!*”

With a loud dong, the spell bounced off Harry’s shield.

“What’s the matter? Not powerful enough? Your *Lord* didn’t show you all the tricks, did he?” Harry used Michael’s own trick on him. “Who’s being used now?”

“Can’t you see, Michael? I NEVER killed anybody. It was Voldemort all along!”

“Didn’t I tell you to shut up? SHUT UP!” Michael yelled, his face red with fury.

Many duelers glanced at them, but they were too busy to assist any of them.

“Just because of you, they got my sister! Poor Adele!” His face creased with emotion; however, it soon returned to its original contempt ridden façade. “Don’t tell me it wasn’t your fault, because it was! My family was never the same again, just because you had to be born, you had to be *there*.”

"I still mourn the day you ousted the Dark Lord. Only if you had died, nothing would've come to this... But nothing's enough for you. You had to steal Cho away from me too!"

Harry could only half understand Michael's ramblings. Still, the name Adele rang a bell but he couldn't pinpoint where he had heard that name.

"I tried my best to forget about it, but I couldn't! And when I tried again, she sent me away! She's still obsessed with you. The Boy—"

"Corner! She's over me. She never even loved me!"

Michael's eyes widened. "You LIE! You always lie! Why can't people see through you? You are just a skimpy little git. Nothing else!"

"*Accio Gargoyle!*" Michael looked at the Gargoyle statue nearby and directed it at Harry.

Harry had to jump and slide behind to be saved from the hulking statue. The shield shot out of his hand, and seeing the opportune time, Michael gave him a mean grin.

"I'd love to kill you, Potter. No matter, you'll see death soon enough in the place where I'm sending you.

"***Convocato Caeli Adeo—***" With a combination of many circled swishes, he started incanting to call upon an unknown Link to the Gateway that Harry had seen only twice before.

It was as if Dumbledore had sensed danger, he was beside Harry silencing Michael in a single swish.

"He is NOT going anywhere, Michael," Dumbledore's voice boomed at him.

Michael tried to stun Dumbledore but he was no match for him. Dumbledore issued a flame as strong as if being issued from a dragon's mouth out of his wand. The flame was not hot but deeply comforting and warm. It surrounded Harry and Dumbledore in a tight circle.

Harry looked at the white face of Corner, which looked completely drained of blood. Michael looked at the gathering Death Eaters for some help and as if on cue, Bellatrix and Avery emerged out of the still dueling pack of the Light and Dark Side.

"He *is* going, Dumbledore," Bellatrix shouted above the hubbub. "C'mon, Avery, let's finish this." She cocked her head at him.

"With my pleasure, Trixie," Avery smiled at her, while she spun around in shock.

***"Petrificus Totalus!"*** Avery's wand was not pointed at Dumbledore but at Bellatrix.

She was too stunned to counter it and fell backwards, stiffly. "You traitor! You bloody ba—"

Harry looked on, shocked, as Avery's profile shimmered. Harry blinked and widened his eyes just to be sure, and still Avery's profile continued shimmering; his features started changing as if suddenly his cells had acquired freewill and were displacing themselves to become something else entirely.

Bellatrix looked dumbfounded as her mouth made a perfect circle of o, while Avery's profile kept on changing. He threw away the Death Eater mask. His grayish mane was replaced by jet-black hair. His height increased as his face became smooth and age-lines receded to unnoticed laughing-lines.

"Sirius!" Harry almost had a heart attack, seeing the grinning face of his Godfather in place of Avery's.

He heard Dumbledore whisper, "It can't be..."

"This is a trick! You're not Sirius. I killed him with my own hands!" Bellatrix was hysterical. "I saw him falling through the blasted veil!"

"Did you now?" He smiled at her candidly.

"You are dead. Dead! DEAD!" Bellatrix's scream got everyone's attention. Most of the Death Eaters paused seeing their ringleader at

the brink of defeat while the Light Side simply paused with astonishment. Seeing a dead man walking was not everyday treat.

It was then Harry noticed what had been nagging him before, this Sirius didn't have the deep hollow eyes that had become the characteristic of his face after he came out of Azkaban. The Sirius standing in front of him had open and bright eyes; he was exactly like the Sirius in his parents' marriage photographs.

Bellatrix seemed to writhe with contempt seeing the happy Sirius grinning at her. "If I have to, I'll kill you again!" And with a steely will, she shook out of the spell and still lying down, incanted the worst spell. "*Avada Kedavra!*"

"Oh, no you don't!" He conjured a blue orb around himself. The Killing Curse was so powerful that life seemed to drain out of him for maintaining the orb in place. His figure seemed to shimmer again. Harry narrowed his eyes and could clearly see that his black hair started showing streaks of gray and tawny hair alternatively, at different places; his eyebrows seemed to thicken and then shrink again. It was as if another image was superimposing on this young Sirius. However, the shield was still up, and the curse was becoming fainter by the second. Finally the blue shield pulsed around him once, and the curse disappeared completely. His form solidified again.

"You had enough fun on my part, Trixie—"

"Stop calling me that!

"*Crucio!*"

"Is that all you can do?" He cocked his eyebrows mockingly.

Bellatrix was about to curse him again when he blasted her backwards with the same shimmering blue light that he had used to create the protective orb around him. Bellatrix's eyes glazed over as her body slammed into the nearest wall she had her back to. Her figure slumped to a crumple on the floor.

Seeing Bellatrix overthrown, Harry felt a surge of pleasure that he couldn't name. The Death Eaters on the other hand, Disapparated instantly, as if using a Portkey. They were there and then they weren't.

Lupin came running towards them, eying the young Sirius suspiciously. "You are not Sirius! Tell us who you—"

"He's an illusion," Harry finally lipped.

"No, he's not." Dumbledore's voice was more than sure, his eyes scrutinizing their savior.

However, nobody saw Michael Corner flitting to a corner. In the process of capturing Bellatrix, Michael had acquired a Death Eater mask and had gone missing in the crowd. Now as loud as a Fwooper's call, he finally showed himself, calling upon the Gateway to everyone's surprise.

***"Convocato Caeli Adeo Forisio Portus!"***

A hurricanic wind ensued and the Aurors and Order members backed away from the portal. They raised their arms to shield their eyes from the needling wind that blew around the opened portal.

Dumbledore pressed Harry's shoulder. They were still surrounded by the warm flames that he had conjured out of his wand, safe from the pull of the portal. Harry didn't even feel the Gateway's presence as Dumbledore's flame-shield seemed to keep everything out of its circle.

Lupin stunned Michael in a jiffy, and just as he was stepping forward to close the portal, he, too, was blasted by the brilliant blue light out of Sirius's strange but shiny wand. This was the last evidence of the heaping pile that proved this was someone else, not the real Sirius. Who exactly, Harry couldn't wait to find out.

"What d'you think you're doing!" Tonks dropped daggers at Sirius with her glare, as she hunkered down to check Lupin's pulse.

Young Sirius ignored her, and said aloud, "I don't want to harm anyone, but if anyone even takes another step, they will be done for." He stared around the group narrowly. "This is between me, the boy

and..." He let the sentence hang there, while he emphasized his point by glaring everyone down.

He then turned towards where Harry and Dumbledore were standing. Harry got goosebumps as he looked at this Sirius. It was as if Sirius had directly Apparated from his own memories from his own Diary to save Harry.

However, all the warm feelings went out of his head as Sirius attacked their flame-shield with his brilliant-blue energy.

"You fool! What are you doing?" Dumbledore shouted at him.

Harry had never seen Dumbledore more livid. However, Sirius kept on charging at the shield, staring directly at Harry.

His eyes were not filled with malice or hate but openness, as if imploring. They were those eyes you see in your friends that are loyal to you. Harry felt Dumbledore's grip on his shoulder loosen as he sighed as if defeated. The moment Harry turned away to see Dumbledore's expression, the flame shield perished around them. Without support, Harry willed his body not to budge. Still, his feet scraped, the surging portal with a black gaping mouth seemed to call at him.

Harry looked helplessly at Dumbledore whose eyes looked more than vacant. He looked around the Order members who all seemed resigned; none of them was doing anything to stop whatever was happening, as if too dumbfounded by it all.

The same blue light blasted Harry backwards, closer to the portal.

"No, you can't!" A girlish shriek rang out, and to his astonishment, he saw Ginny's head hovering behind Sirius. "You monster! What are you trying to do!"

"*Ferula!*" Ginny incanted desperately, trying to reenact her motions of saving him.



Harry grabbed at the white gauze, understanding that she was wearing his invisibility cloak. He also understood that she had snooped out of the school to follow them.

Ginny's appearance widened the smile on Sirius's face. "I was wondering, when you'd reveal yourself." He looked at her, totally unruffled.

Ginny gaped as she was blasted by the same blue light; however, this time around it didn't seem that it had harmed her in any way except for sending her closer to the portal.

"Professor Dumbledore!" she called, panicked.

Harry looked at Dumbledore who was directly looking at Sirius, and seemed to scan his thoughts. He bowed his head and sighed, finally answering Ginny, "Don't hesitate, dear girl... It seems evident for both of you now."

He looked at Harry, who was only few steps away from the portal's mouth. "I was trying to find a way around this, but couldn't. You have to go... Just don't lose your way, Harry... In time you'll come back...."

"Go, Harry!" Sirius implored, "You were meant to do this since you were born... Take your destiny in your own hands... Accept what you are!"

Harry couldn't hold on anymore. The Gateway's pull was too much to take and even with the use of his will, he couldn't stop it from sucking him in. He let go of the gauze, the connection that Ginny had built. However, Ginny, not hesitating another second, also plunged into the portal after him.

Whatever was meant to be, it seemed they had to find it themselves. Together or apart, only time would tell.

-x-X-x-

## Chapter 27 – Caradoc the Drifter

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Young Sirius closed the revolving Gateway, just after Ginny fell into it. The crowd stared sullenly at him along with Dumbledore, who only stared out of weariness.

“Caradoc?” Dumbledore questioned him, and he nodded his head.

*‘Yes, I’m back, Dumbledore. And I bring good and bad news, both,’* he spoke, not with his voice but his mind.

Dumbledore nodded gravely, and as if satisfied with his words, he directed the Order members who had huddled around the stranger to lower their wands.

The Aurors could do with Bellatrix whatever they wanted, but he first needed to bring Michael out of Voldemort’s Imperius Curse. He caught Emmeline’s attention to take care of the boy. “Take him straight to the school infirmary and let Poppy know that he’s to remain behind close doors until I talk to him.”

As if Fawkes knew that he was needed, he appeared and sat down on Emmeline’s shoulder. Nodding at Dumbledore, he transported Emmeline along with a still stunned Michael to Hogwarts.

Dumbledore sighed listlessly. *Albus, you’re becoming an old coot. You looked over Corner.*

*‘But you haven’t lost your touch, Dumbledore. Sorry for the interruption, but I couldn’t help but stick my leg out. You saw all this before anybody did. Only because of you, I’ll now be able to help Harry, whose powers you’ve harnessed quite well.’*

*Well, I do seem to have some spark left after all.* Dumbledore turned towards Kingsley and gave him the responsibility of reviving Lupin, as well as the safe transportation of the Weasley twins to St. Mungo’s.

Caradoc Dearborn shook his head at Dumbledore. He hasn't changed, this man, he thought. *'We are pressed on time, Dumbledore,'* he pushed on.

*That, we are.* Albus Dumbledore knew that whatever had happened was bound to happen, because he had prepared for it even before the day Harry had opened his eyes to this world. Yes, the same old coot had tried his best to know everything about the boy who would someday end the Dark forces for the better. And the ace up his sleeve, Caradoc Dearborn, hasn't failed after all.

-X-

"It's awfully late." Hermione looked at her watch, which was showing half past ten.

"It's been *ages!*" Ron bellowed in frustration. "I know something's wrong!"

"We should've been more persuasive..."

"We should've gone with him!"

"No wonder, everyone's shut up." Hermione pouted. "Something has happened... why else have we been locked inside the school like this? Even Professor McGonagall hasn't come out of her office since lunch break."

The day had been strange for Hermione. Not only Ron had asked her out—*finally!*—but Harry had went missing. All the happiness that she had been feeling had simmered to an acute sense of worry. How could she enjoy herself when her friend seemed to be in trouble? She chastised herself repeatedly.

"Would you quit it, Hermione? It's not your fault!"

"We could've helped! How come we didn't follow him with invisibility cloak on? We've done this before..."

"Because we knew Dumbledore's no fool. He's off his rocker, but he's the greatest wizard—"

"I *know*. I'm just... worried."

"Have you seen Ginny? I haven't—"

"—since morning..." They shared dark looks.

"I don't like this one bit!" Hermione moaned.

"Maybe Luna ate her brains and she got lost, eh?" Ron cracked, while Hermione smiled feebly.

Now that he mentioned it, Hermione didn't remember seeing Ginny anywhere in Hogsmeade either. *Where could she have gone?*

After lunch, they had gone to Hogsmeade and Hermione had enjoyed herself thoroughly, Ron hadn't mentioned Victor once; he had been more than pleasant, making her laugh that her stomach hurt. However, they had been interrupted by the sudden appearance of Hogwarts professors, who had herded the students back to school.

News had come that Hogwarts could be attacked; therefore, the students shouldn't loiter outside, not even in the nearby village. They had been cooped up inside the common rooms from then on, with strict orders to all the Prefects that nobody should be allowed outside the houses.

Being Prefects, they got the duty to patrol outside the Gryffindor common room after the evening. They only had seen Filch about with his beloved Mrs. Norris; they looked more than happy to have the castle all to themselves. Nearly Headless Nick had also been about, asking about their studies but seeing their long faces, he too had drifted off. Furthermore, they had been so warped in worrying about Harry that they hadn't noticed Ginny's disappearance until now.

Ron seemed to be thinking along the same lines. Today was the first day that he hadn't rowed with Hermione for a change. He had been feeling quite good until they were called back to school. Now he had to worry about his sister as well. A sinking feeling intensified in his stomach, just as faint steps were heard from down the hallway they were guarding.

They exchanged quizzical looks and looked at the entrance which soon revealed Professor Snape descending upon them, along with a smirking Malfoy in tow.

*"Why is Snape coming here with Malfoy?"* Ron whispered, disgusted.

Before Hermione could answer, they were addressed by Snape.

"You two, move along for Malfoy to takeover. Professor Dumbledore has called you in his office."

Looking at Malfoy's stern expression, it was evident that he didn't know why he had been brought along. Obviously, guarding the Gryffindor common room wasn't on his agenda, but then again, he couldn't argue with his own Head of House.

Ron and Hermione silently made their way with Snape to Dumbledore's office. They were wise enough not to question their Potions Master, because he already looked in a foul mood.

However, they were not ready to find most of the Order members lounging in Dumbledore's office, which unsettled them more than Snape's mood.

Hermione gasped in surprise when Mrs. Weasley clutched both of them, hugging them close. Ron squirmed under her grip but seeing her cry he relented by patting her back uneasily.

Almost everyone was present except for Mr. Weasley, twins, Moody and Kingsley Shacklebolt. Everyone looked tired and upset; especially Lupin, who was sitting by the fire, clutching his head; Tonks was sitting beside him, patting his shoulder and looking quite concerned; Hagrid seemed to be lost in some thought, while looking outside from the east window; Vidal, Charlie and Bill were buried in some grave debate. The whole gathering looked as if someone had just died. Even Snape was looking somber and drawn.

"What's going on?" Ron asked his mother.

She could only say, "Terrible... just terrible... Fred, George... Ginny... poor Harry!"

Ron's heart sank as he looked anxiously at Hermione, who had a similar expression of distress on her face. He would have asked more questions but shut up, looking at Dumbledore rise from his center table.

Dumbledore had been busy with the curious silver instruments that littered his table; faint whistles still came off them as they whirled about. However, the other noises hushed, and everyone tuned in, including the old headmaster portraits.

Ron noted that Dumbledore looked tired. His twinkling eyes were creased with worry.

Dumbledore moved in front of his table, and started, "I would like to assure everyone that everything is fine, at least, in the current circumstances." He looked at Molly Weasley, who kept on sniffing. "The Death Eater attack on Diagon Alley wasn't successful. No casualties happened, and we even captured Bellatrix Lestrange."

That seemed to cheer Ron up, but looking at the grim faces around him, he asked the burning question, quite bravely: "Is Harry all right?"

"Yes, Ron, I believe so," Dumbledore answered, "however, he's not here right now and the more time we spend discussing it, the more he'll be losing where he is right now."

"What d'you mean?" Hermione was more than worried.

"I will make this as short as possible," said Dumbledore, and taking a deep sigh continued, "I'm afraid that I have to be the bearer of bad news: Harry and Ginny have been sent to Caeli, a world that was conjured by Ursula Weasley."

"My great-great-grandmother's *world*?" Ron couldn't believe his ears. "Ginny..."

"Yes," Dumbledore nodded. "Where the Vita Scroll will be formed...."

"Did You—V—Voldemort"—He ignored the usual cringes—"did this?" Ron asked daringly.

Hermione didn't know whether to look proud or shocked.

"Voldemort wanted to rid off Harry, yes. That's why he tried his best to send him to Caeli almost twice before, because without the Ventosus Scroll, if he had tried to enter it, he would've died. But, I'm getting ahead here. To answer simply: No, Ron. Someone else did."

Most of the crowd looked confused, but before the chatter could start again, Dumbledore held up his hands, and said, "Everyone, I would like you to meet Caradoc Dearborn. Whom I thought I'd lost, but he had only been imprisoned. He's the one who had persuaded me to let go of Harry and Ginny for their own good."

Lupin's head snapped up from its stupor. Hagrid finally turned towards Dumbledore, while the rest of them gaped at the new arrival. Few gasps followed, as a form shimmered into view beside the Headmaster; it was as though he had materialized out of thin air.

The new arrival looked rather like an old lion. There were streaks of grey on his mane of tawny hair and bushy eyebrows; he had bright yellowish eyes behind a pair of wire-rimmed spectacles.

"It can't be!" Emmeline Vance looked shocked. "I thought you were dead..."

"No. He didn't die, but became older than his years," Dumbledore provided.

"Rad, you—?" Lupin faltered, looking closely at Caradoc.

Most of the older crowd of the Order came and shook his hand; however, Hagrid didn't budge from his spot, and neither did Tonks or Lupin.

"How could you send Harry there, Rad?" Lupin's eyes threw daggers at the new fellow. "He doesn't even know the rules of that world!"

"Why don't you hear out Dumbledore first, Remus?" Caradoc said gently.

Molly Weasley seemed to agree with Lupin as she nodded at him, and looked sorely at Dumbledore as if not believing him at all.

“Caradoc’s a Shapeshifter; that is, he can change into any physical form, including inanimate objects. Like Morphing, Shapeshifting is hereditary; though, it only wakes when you’re an adult. Caradoc had only been experimenting with his new found powers when he had gone missing.

“When Voldemort was in power before, the research of other worlds had been at its peak, and most of the Unspeakables were assigned to find as many new worlds as they could. Along with James, Lily, and Sirius, Caradoc too was involved in this. I had been looking over their assignments—after they completed their training—on exploring new worlds and befriending other living beings, who could help us if we were to be taken over by Dark forces. This agenda is known to the Wizengamot as well, who approved of it then.

“With Caradoc’s disappearance the mission faced a setback. Voldemort also started tracking James and Lily, because of which they weren’t able to continue. They were the ones who researched the significance of Ventosus Scroll and the location of Caeli: Ursula’s world. They found the Link of Caeli, also traveled to it, knowing too well that they had to either find the rest of the three scrolls or protect the one they had from wrong hands.

“We all know what actually happened, however. Their child, Harry Potter, miraculously defeated Voldemort, making him only a shadow of his previous self. But in the process we lost James and Lily who actually knew about this whole mystery. If it weren’t for Harry’s visions, I would never have made the connection and known what Voldemort had been up to.

“Before I reach the core of this discussion, let me give you some insight on Ursula Weasley.”

Many heads nodded, while other simply continued listening to the Headmaster.

“She was a very powerful witch. More powerful than any Dark Wizard could’ve ever been. We never knew much about her because of her



unexpected departure. The pain of her husband's death got to her and nobody still knows what actually happened when she performed the strange spell of hers....

"Before that, in her prime, she conjured a world of her own in another dimension. You may imagine it as a world that came off from Ursula's own mind. She had made it not only because she wanted to live there, but also to protect the only place where the Vita Scrolls could be merged.

"There are too many magical scrolls in the history but some are genuine and quite powerful. Ursula embedded the spirit of her own powers as well as the ones that her ancestors had bestowed upon her in the Vita Scroll, which she then divided into four parts, corresponding to different elements."

Dumbledore went on to tell them about the significance of each scroll, and how it had the power to control the basic four elements, water, fire, earth, and wind.

"Ursula made a heaven for herself and a temple, where the scrolls would merge to form the Vita Scroll. However, she couldn't live to enjoy them. Still, as the wizarding heritage goes, everything powerful is passed onto the next generation, and in this case to the female Weasley who would come after her."

"Ginny!" Molly Weasley gasped.

"Yes, Molly, your daughter is the heir to the Vita Scroll, because not a girl was born between Ursula and Ginny Weasley. Now, Voldemort wants that scroll, and if it falls into his hands... I myself shudder only to think of the consequences.

"This brings me back to Caradoc. The last communication that I received from him was that he had been captured by the *Ulterius*. These are delicate humanoids, who consider themselves the Highest Beings because of their troves of knowledge about the rest of the worlds. Their world, Taita, has such vast knowledge that I will waste away reading and would only acquire one percent of their total knowledge." Dumbledore nodded towards Caradoc to continue his own tale.

“Ulterians do look delicate but they are not in anyway weak. Their mind powers make for their frail bodies, which are so strong that their Mages can move this earth with a flick of their hand. They captured me after observing my innate powers because they foresaw that I would be of use in the future, but not then.

“They imprisoned me to prepare for what was coming. They taught me *Livor*—the force I used against the Killing Curse at Diagon Alley—their powerful magic. During the grueling sessions of *Livor*, I was told that the Mages of Uletrius, their Higher Council, had seen into the future and saw Darkness spreading throughout the worlds. It was then I was told about Ursula Weasley; she had been so powerful that she had foreseen the same future. She had also figured out the different dimensions and how they were placed apart from each other but still connected.

“This was the reason she did something to save us all; she devised the scroll to break the dark clouds, which would descend on every world if not stopped. The power, if fell into wrong hands would brew such chaos that would make the worlds tremble in horror. Ursula realized this danger, so she structured her world in the manner that one can only enter Caeli, if they have one of the Vita scrolls or is the heir to her heritage.

“Moreover, expecting the unexpected, the Mages of Ulterius taught me to transverse between worlds with the help of their magic. They made me a Drifter. They saw that the one with the pure heart and brave soul needed an ally to attain the scroll. I know all this and more from an Elder Mage of Taita, who was the one that freed me and sent me to this time. I look older because the time passes swiftly in Taita, not like the time here, which is slow. I can always shapeshift into a strapping young man but not in front of friends whom I now request to trust me, because I tell the truth and nothing but.

“I can say that the Ulterians taught me well, because I have the power to enter any world that I choose if I know its Link, *Livor* would save me even if I wasn’t allowed in that world. I can enter Caeli and help the younglings achieve their destiny.

"But I'm not faultless... I was hoodwinked even when the Mages had forewarned me. In the process of knowing more about the Potter boy and Ursula's heir, I lost the scrolls of Fire and Earth to Voldemort."

"It was you who Harry kept seeing?" asked Hermione, who had been listening in with rapt attention. "You took Sirius's shape."

"Yes, Miss Granger, it was me... I let him see, what he wanted to see."

"You scared away the Death Eaters from Shrieking Shack? Yes?" Vidal commented.

"Yes, Tarziah, that was me as well," Caradoc replied. "I tried to be in a lot of places at the same time, and got distracted. Sometimes, very..."

"It isn't your fault that you returned to a changed wizarding world, Caradoc, all of us have changed through the years," Dumbledore provided.

"I can see that now." Caradoc's eyes swept over Vidal and rested on Snape, who challenged him with his own steady glare.

"Why didn' yeh contact Dumbledore sir, when yeh returned?" Hagrid bellowed, showing his frustration.

Lupin looked beyond himself as well. "We still trust you, Rad. Why all the tricks in the shadows?"

"Because I was doubtful, Remus," Caradoc sighed, his eyebrows creasing into a bunch. "I saw Snape in your meetings and I thought he was spying for Voldemort... I thought it wasn't safe until I realized that it was the other way around. Things didn't help that Dumbledore was out of Headquarters and Voldemort was rampaging throughout the world!"

"Raid on Romanian Ministry?" He flicked the incidents on his fingers. "It was for the information on the Fire Scroll in the cave of the Mystical Dragon. Three Muggles found dead in the tomb of Ramses the Great? Scroll of Earth was hidden there! Strange weather

conditions around the world? Voldemort's experimentation with the scrolls!"

A gasp ensued in the crowd.

"Are you telling us that he can still use the scrolls without even merging them with others?"

"Yes, Remus, he can. That's why I've to rush to Caeli to protect the heirs."

"Is Harry an heir too?" Hermione asked, confused.

"No. He's the protector of the Ventosus Scroll for now, just as Lily and James were. But, it's foreseen that—"—He looked carefully at Mrs. Weasley—"the power would be transferred somehow..." He glanced at Dumbledore for some clue.

"A battle was foreseen and if the Lighter Side didn't win, it will plunder for a long, long time..." Dumbledore provided, sighing.

"I was so adamant on sending Harry Potter with Ginny Weasley because who else could've done it except for the Boy-Who-Lived and the Heir? Both of them have shared something with Voldemort. Who knows more than them what to do with his mind games?" Caradoc rationalized. "Also, both possess exceptional powers of their own."

"Ginny's not coming back, right?" Mrs. Weasley shrieked in grief, gazing at Caradoc. "Those *Ulterian* cowards saw something horrible that you aren't telling me!"

"Nothing is decided; please believe me. You can't really see the future with all of its details, only the bigger details that the Elder saw and told me. There's still hope..."

"Why didn't your Ulterian gods save the scroll themselves? They sure look powerful enough," Molly spat furiously.

Caradoc's face fell. "They don't meddle in others' problems themselves." He sighed. "They appoint ambassadors like me."

It was quite clear that he, himself, didn't like the situation he was in, but was trying his best to improve upon it.

"Molly," Dumbledore came to his rescue. "I have my complete faith on Caradoc, as well as Harry. They wouldn't let anything happen to Ginny."

"Harry's just a boy!"

"No, Mum, he's not just an ordinary boy... or wizard even," said Ron.

"Yes, he's saved our necks so many times. He'll do it again... you'll see." Hermione glared at everybody who would dare to say otherwise.

"So, are you telling me that now we sit around and wait for them? Doing nothing?" Lupin said unbelievably.

"No." Dumbledore—who had been staring at his watch again—looked up. "It seems that two Muggle localities of London have been surrounded by Death Eaters. Voldemort's tricking us with his side-plans."

"I'm going to Caeli; I only stayed back this long to clear the whole matter up. I'll try my best to bring them back without harm." Caradoc's form shimmered, and without even saying a parting word, he vanished out of sight.

In the frenzy of who would go to which place, and over the crisply barked orders of the senior Order members, Dumbledore was thinking only one thing:

*Harry, I hope, I have prepared you well...*

-x-X-x-

## Chapter 28 – Caeli: Ursula's Haven

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Harry had closed his eyes for the onslaught of pull that not only seemed to draw in his whole weight but every single particle of his body. It was as though he was going against a rushing twister, his cheeks flapping around his clenched teeth, his spectacles smoking with the building heat.

It was crudely similar to Portkey travel, except for the fact that there was no jerk around the navel; his whole body got tugged around by the pull, till he floated in an unknown mist, going through strange, pulsing tunnels.

Currently he was going through a grayish tunnel that pulsed ominously, and seemed to be made out of some liquid-looking substance. He closed his eyes and willed himself to be calm and not panic. He wasn't aware of the fact that Ginny was following him as well. She however, had her eyes closed shut, out of nerves.

Some more time passed and it was as though Harry had spent years traveling in that portal. His insides squirmed, as he thought, he would die if the rushing wind that seemed to bite at every part of his body continued for another second.

As if triggered by his thoughts, the speeding wind mellowed down to a light breeze. Harry opened his eyes, and saw brightness in front of him. Wherever he was sent, the destination didn't look far anymore.

He readied himself to be flung off the portal because he was traveling too fast, and even if the wind slowed his descent down, he didn't trust his own feet to take his weight after such a strange travel. Just as predicted he was tossed out of the portal. Seeing the green ground rushing towards him, he did what came first to his mind.

*"Plumalio!"* he incanted, just as he had seen his mother do, many years before.

He landed on the same grass, which has turned soft and fluffy with his spell. He sighed into the plump padding, sprawled beneath him.

He closed his eyes and let his organs find their original positions inside his body. The way he had traveled, if he lost some important wiring on the way, he wouldn't be too surprised. However, he was not ready for a:

*UUFFF!*

Something, or rather someone had come crashing through the air and landed straight on his limp body. He had already been lying flat on his stomach, the new weight almost flattened him, crushing the few breathes that he had taken in this fresh atmosphere. "For crying out loud—"

For a second, few locks of red hair danced in front of his face, and then the weight shifted away. Harry became acutely aware of the person above him, and wanted to beat himself up for starting on such a stupid note.

He slowly moved around, while his body protested with numbness of its own. He clenched, and then unclenched his limbs to get some circulation going. After a while, he hoisted himself up on one elbow, and turned to confirm that it was Ginny. Dumbledore's words were coming back to him... *It seems evident for both of you now.*

"Sorry," said Ginny, in a breathless voice, "couldn't control my landing."

"No problem." Harry crossed his legs painfully. He was having trouble in getting his limbs back to working normally.

To Harry's amazement, she was sitting across from him, quite comfortably, tucking both of her feet on her right side. Her face was red as if she had painfully scrubbed it clean, that made Harry touch his own face. He felt the heat of his own skin emanating from it.

Ginny was looking around herself, finding an amazingly different world. Still, a thought nagged at her that there was something familiar about this place, even when she couldn't rightly place it.

They were sitting on an area that was mostly covered by soft, velvety grass along with clumps of wild flowerbeds. A violet sky loomed over

them, which was continuously over flown by rainbow colored arches that emitted faint rays of light. Brightly colored trees were speckled in the distant forests, while wild flowers danced all about them.

A distant mountain towered from between what seemed to be a thick forest. Ginny turned around and saw that except for that forest no other prominent feature was visible from where they had dropped. And there was greenery wherever her eyes went.

There was no sign of life either, except for the plant-life around them. No sign of humans, any village or anything similar.

Harry seemed to be doing the thinking of his own when he finally stood up and stretched his limbs. He was relieved that his legs were not giving away as before. Perhaps, it had all been due to the travel. Dumbledore had informed him about the unpleasant things that can happen while traveling between worlds.

“Don’t you feel any stiffness?” he asked her curiously.

“No...” She looked at him doubtfully, as she stood up brushing her robes. However, a look of concern crept into her face, when she noticed his reddish skin.

“You are red too,” Harry added delicately, guessing her line of thought.

Ginny touched her face and felt the temperature. “Maybe a cooling charm will help?” She performed a mild version of it on herself, and felt for her skin again.

“You look okay now,” Harry gave her the results, and did the same himself.

They stood awkwardly, not knowing how to start, and from where exactly.

“Why—”

“What—”



They had started speaking at the same time, and shared a nervous laugh to acknowledge it.

“Let’s head for that mountain? Looks important enough, right?” Harry suggested and Ginny nodded.

They silently made for it, passing curious wild flowers that turned and twirled with every wave of the fresh breeze.

“What a ride, huh?” Harry said, after covering half the distance to the forest.

“Yeah...” Ginny looked lost, and Harry thought better to interrupt her train of thoughts.

“It can’t be!” she bellowed in frustration, after some time.

“What can’t be?” Harry asked, bewildered.

“That strange Sirius... and Michael... the one after you...”

“Yeah... I don’t think it was Sirius though; it was someone else pretending to be him... I never thought about Michael as the one after me, I was betting on Colin for some reason.” Harry fidgeted with his robes, and took off his glasses to give them the much needed wipe.

“He’s been troubled for some reason, *that* I’m sure of,” Ginny contemplated. “I agree on Sirius. Who could it be then?”

“I dunno...”

As if remembering something, Ginny said, “Here, your cloak.” She handed it to him.

“How did you—”

“—get it?” Ginny finished his sentence.

Harry nodded, while feeling inside the cloak for making sure that everything was there.

"It was easy. You know, I have practice going through your things... Remember my first-year?" Ginny flushed, but Harry could easily see that she was putting a brave face over her own dark past. "I hope you don't mind... I only looked in your trunk."

"Actually, I saw Michael skipping class and heading outside to Hogwarts grounds, when I already knew where you were going... It all just seemed a bit dodgy... I couldn't think of any other way, except to borrow your cloak for following him."

"You could've asked Ron or Hermione to help you."

"They were... a little busy at that time..."—Harry looked at her questioningly—"They were talking quite civilly for the first time and I didn't want to interrupt. You know, they need to move on!" She sighed exasperatedly.

"You know about their—?"

"Of course! Who *doesn't*?" She shook her head, while Harry smiled.

"Anyway, I caught up to Michael near the Forbidden Forest. He was doing quite a job of concealing himself with Disillusionment Charm. If it weren't for the Marauder's Map—which I found inside the cloak, mind you—I wouldn't have spotted him."

"It was strange really; he kept on muttering to himself and looked more than on edge."

"Maybe he was being controlled? Voldemort,"—Harry felt a surge of glee at Ginny's unflinching stance—"can do a lot of damage. Who knows better than you..."

"Yes... this could be a possibility, because Michael wasn't bad at all, at least until I dated him."

That seemed to hit Harry rather badly as he looked away from her. "People are not always what they seem, Ginny... You get used sometimes and you aren't even aware of it until it blows right into your face...."

“I’m sorry, I shouldn’t have—”

“It’s not your fault,” Harry said, coldly. He was instantly ashamed of himself. “I’m—”

“Please, Harry, you don’t have to apologize for everything. I’m a big girl, I can handle *things*—”

“I still have it!” Harry burst in glee.

“What?”

“The mirror Lupin gave me.” Harry took it out, but his face fell seeing it broken. “Did you—”

“I didn’t even touch it,” Ginny supplied, before even being asked.

“*Reparo!*” The surface of the broken mirror wriggled meltingly, but still a part remained in between, as if a piece was missing.

“Maybe it broke while we were traveling through the Gateway?” Ginny provided helpfully.

“Reckon so...” Harry looked at her searchingly, when he noticed that the sky was turning darker by the second. “Look.”

Ginny also stared at the darkening sky; the rainbow arches seemed more distinct now as the sky around it turned blood-red from violet.

“Time flies here or this world has shorter days?” she pondered.

“Search me.” Harry shrugged his shoulders. He put Lupin’s mirror back, pocketed the Foe Glass along with the globe that Dumbledore had give him, and shrank everything else to fit his pocket.

They lit their wands as the sky turned totally black, except for the Aurora that decorated it.

They were almost near the clearing of the forest, which in light looked quite welcoming; but now, as the darkness settled in, the elongating shadows of the forest, twisting trails and exotic underbrush, thick and interlaced boughs, looked nothing but ominous.

"I'm thirsty," Ginny said suddenly.

"Let me conjure some water." Harry tried, but to no avail. "Dumbledore told me that every such world has a set of rules of their own. We'll have to explore this ones' by ourselves." He looked around. "Looking at the greenery, there ought to be some lake nearby."

"I hope so." Ginny looked at him forlornly.

"Harry, why are we even here." This was the first time that she let slip her dread. "We don't even know where we have to go..."

It was as if Harry's fear was realized because he too didn't know much why he was actually there, except for the scroll bit. "To get one of the Vita Scrolls, maybe?"

"And which one is that?"

"Dunno..."

"Exactly... How can we know? Do you see that forest? It looks so sinister in darkness, and I can bet, we'll have to pass it."

They stopped walking and stood just a few steps from a bunch of trees that seemed to be the beginning of the forest.

"I don't think there's any other way around it..." Harry squinted at the forest, hovering his wand a little higher. "Look about, Ginny, except for this forest, all we can see is flat land. Dumbledore told me that such worlds have their own characteristics. Maybe this one's just flat, and the center of it is that forest?"

"Looks like it..."

"We don't have any other option unless to search this whole lot out."

"It'll take ages..." Ginny sighed into her flexed hand. "If only we would've been given some clue!"

Except for 'Er...' Harry couldn't think of any proper response, so he remained silent.

Nonetheless, they started walking, first carefully and then leisurely into the dark forest. Harry noted that the trees were of strange color, bottle-green, deep-purple, mauve, even black.

Fallen leaves crunched beneath their feet and protruding, mossy roots made them jump once in a while. Ginny got some hope from the mossy growth that acutely shifted to the left side of the forest, giving them the sign of water nearby.

“Dumbledore must’ve a reason in sending us here.” Ginny said, streaking towards left.

Harry agreed with her. “Right... And Michael looked bothered, not evil. What d’you reckon about *that* Sirius.”

“Odd...? Whoever that person was, he didn’t look evil, and I know evil when I see it...”

“Was he actually trying to help us?”

Before Ginny could answer, a sound interrupted their conversation. Harry put a finger on his lips to shush Ginny, and stopped to pinpoint the sound. It was as though, someone was giggling; it was coming from the illuminated clearing in front of them.

Harry silently took out his invisibility cloak and signaled Ginny to come inside it. She looked at him strangely but agreed on his suggestion. They easily fit into the cloak and without even rustling another leaf; they stepped onwards to the clearing.

What they saw next, almost took their breath away.

That particular clearing had a dominating tree that seemed as if spread almost to the sky. Its crowning and thick boughs loomed superiorly over the rest of the trees scattered below. The roots of the tree were so thick that they crept out of the ground, making twisting knots around the whole clearing. Just beyond the gigantic tree was a lake, which seemed to stretch out quite considerable distance. Only a faint band of trees were visible on the other side of the lake.

But this was all quite normal, what had made them gape in amazement was the creatures that were flopped beside the lakeshore.

They weren't like anything that Harry had ever seen. They were definitely female, which was evident from their giggles and feminine stature, and were five in number. All of them had long, light-green hair, and bright sparkling eyes. Their whole body seemed to be made of soft wood and leaves. They had flowing, shiny leaves in place of hair, while the rest of their body was covered with folds of leafy skin. They had lamp-like luminous eyes, short spiky nose, and well-formed lips. If they hadn't been so pleasant looking, Harry would've labeled them as some female species of Bowtruckles, but that was stretching it quite a bit.

Ginny grabbed Harry's shoulder, her eyes popping at the creatures. It was then that one of them steered around, and looked straight at them.

"That cloak wouldn't do, dearies. *We can* see you." A delicate voice came off her, while her bright green eyes crinkled with her smile. The rest of the four swiveled their heads at them.

Seeing them still stationary, another one of them moved towards them, smiling openly. "No need to be shocked, dearies. We're Wood Nymphs, and would never think of harming you.

"It's been ages since someone was along; isn't that right, girls?" she asked her fellows good-naturedly, who nodded their heads in unison.

"Er... my name's Ginny, and this is Harry." Getting over the shock, Ginny pulled out of the cloak, and made the introductions.

The Wood Nymphs seemed highly pleased that they had gotten over their shock. Friendly smiles were exchanged between all of them.

The one with the green eyes, who had talked to them first, started, "We are natives of here. Caeli, a wondrous place! I'm Selma, and this is Sheila," (she had brown eyes), "Sakina, Salima, and Sasha." The rest of the three had blue eyes.

Sheila came close and scrutinized Harry. "You seem awfully familiar—"

"Can we have some water?" Ginny interrupted.

"Oh, my bad!" Sheila motioned towards Sasha, who plucked a big leaf out of the nearest tree, and went towards the lake. She carefully stored some water into the leaf and brought it towards Ginny, while Salima did the same for Harry.

Harry's stomach growled with hunger after drinking the water. He could guess that only few hours had passed into their journey to this strange world; still, his breakfast seemed days away.

As if getting the message, Sakina brought some strange looking fruits out of a fissure of the tree adjacent to the giant tree. She offered the fruits in a leafy plate and told them to sit down.

"So, what brings you here?" Selma asked, after they had eaten considerably.

"We came here to look for something..." Harry trailed off, looking at Ginny. He wasn't sure that he should divulge in anything sensitive or not.

"Something valuable—"

Selma looked closely at Ginny, as if noticing her for the first time. "Ursula's shadow!" she bellowed, and started fanning herself, while gaping at Ginny.

At that same instant, light hit the top of the gigantic tree. It seemed that another day had started in the strange land called Caeli.

Harry's ears perked up with the mention of Ursula, and Ginny, too, looked quite piqued.

"This can't be!" Sheila exclaimed.

"Has she returned?" Sasha said timidly.

“Is this really *her*?” Sakina looked more than curious.

A sudden chatter ensued between the Wood Nymphs, as they shared anxious glances towards Ginny.

“What’s wrong?” Ginny was trying her best to not look alarmed.

“Are you here to awake the dead?” Sheila asked, cryptically.

It was Harry’s turn to raise his eyebrows. However, before he could show his disdain, the Nymphs huddled tighter, throwing furtive glances at Ginny.

The light was creeping through the thick branches of the huge tree, under which they were sitting, while the lake shimmered brilliantly in the daylight. Both of them noxed their wands.

“Are you a Weasley?” asked Selma abruptly, staring at Ginny.

“How did you know?” Ginny looked at her strangely.

“It *is* her!” Sheila shrieked, her eyes popping.

“It’s about time.” It seemed that Selma had gotten over her awe, as she smiled at Ginny. “We’d been waiting for a long time...”

“Three hundred years to be exact,” Sasha provided, looking overcome.

“Sorry?” Ginny looked confused.

But Harry understood. Dumbledore had told him about Ursula and Weasley family’s heritage. Ginny was the first female born after Ursula; maybe that made her the heir to the scroll.

“Don’t you see? This is your own world, left for you by your great-great-grandmother. You’re her heir,” Selma explained.

“We don’t have all the scrolls, except for one,” Harry chipped in. “How can she be the heir of the scroll, which is not even totally here?”



“Dearies, one is already here; that makes two scrolls.” Selma looked curiously at Harry. “Why are *you* here? You’re not the heir...”

“Er—”

“He’s needed here,” Ginny interrupted. “A greater scheme is at play here... We need to find the scroll...”

“Aqua Scroll,” Salima punctuated.

“D’you know where it is?” Ginny asked hopefully.

“Course we do,” Selma said, matter-of-factly, as if they should have known this all along.

“Come here.” She motioned them nearer to the lake. And as they did, they saw an old boat floating nearby.

“There’s an island up ahead.” She aimed at the left side of the lake. “You need to get off that island, and fall into the gap that’s connecting the water world with the dry world.”

“Say that again?”

“The Aqua scroll’s in there. That’s all we know. We never go there, because of the Guardian...” Sasha shuddered.

“Is the guardian powerful, and mean?” Harry asked, hoping to be told otherwise.

“The guardian’s powerful all right. But the heir has come,”—She looked at Ginny—“You don’t have to worry, the guardian will recognize her blood.”

“Well, there’s only one way to find out,” Harry said, looking at Ginny.

“Go and see, right?” Ginny nodded.

They moved towards the boat after thanking the Wood Nymphs, who gave them some more fruits, and a water-skin made out of an unknown material as a departing gift. “You’ll need your energy,” Selma rationalized.

“Is the island far?” Harry asked, perplexed.

“Not that far, but the days, and nights are short here; haven’t you noticed?”

It was the first time Harry actually understood why he had felt so hungry few minutes ago after journeying for only few hours. Perhaps time did pass rapidly in Ursula’s world. However, he didn’t have much to spare.

He gingerly hopped into the boat, and helped Ginny in after testing its buoyancy. The boat was old and chipped and he hoped that would last the journey. He tried the rowing spell on the paddle, and found to his delight that it worked.

“At least, some things are still the same.” Harry sighed.

“Yeah...” Ginny said distractedly. She performed the Four Point Spell after that; her wand whizzed around her hand, not stopping at any point. She stashed the wand away looking hopelessly at Harry.

“Be careful, dearies,” was the parting shout by Selma.

Harry waved at her, and then smiled at Ginny reassuringly. “It isn’t all that bad. At least we’ll get the second scroll.” Looking at her puzzled expression, Harry started filling her in on the information that Dumbledore had imparted to him about other worlds, and the importance of the Vita Scroll.

After which they settled down, helping themselves with some more fruits and water given by the Nymphs, while enjoying the colorful shrubbery, and trees that passed them by. Harry noticed that Ginny was doing some hard thinking, and that’s why he didn’t interrupt her.

The night fell again, and they lit their wands. In the wand-light, when he looked at Ginny, for some reason she seemed different to him. He was only trying to fathom the difference when their boat started to quiver erratically. They were blinded by white beams of light that were coming out of the river. The beam was somewhat circular; it was as though a huge spotlight was aimed at them from the deep lake, causing the eruption of water.

They only had time to exchange shocked looks, when the boat snapped into halves with a loud crack, and they were left on the mercy of the lake's now disturbing flow.

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## ***Chapter 29 – Aqua Scroll***

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The lake was bubbling around them, as if boiling; still, Harry didn't feel any heat. He tried to swim towards Ginny, but the thrashing waves didn't let him forward however he tried. The blinding light wasn't helping matters; he couldn't make out what was causing the disturbance. Just as he was taking out his wand, he distinctly felt something pass beneath him.

He plunged into the lake to see what it was, only to find hollow darkness. As abruptly as it all had started, the bubbling ceased along the disappearance of bright light; it was as though someone had snuffed the only candle in a room. He was left, staring at the blue nothingness of the lake, and had to come back to the surface for air.

The water became somber again, as if nothing had happened. The darkness of the night ebbed away to the first crack of a violet ray, starting another day.

Harry blinked and cleared his vision to see Ginny's profile. She was having problems in keeping afloat, so he swam towards her to give her a hand. She looked pale, and was having difficulty breathing.

"Ginny, are you OK?" Harry asked, concerned.

She gasped some more. "I went blind for a second there... I dunno what happened...."

"Did you see something?"

"No..." She flapped her arms about to keep afloat. She was staring at something just beyond Harry.

Following her gaze, he turned around to see the outline of an island. With the sweeping daylight, Harry saw that they had reached the island that the Wood Nymphs had talked about.

The island was not only strange looking but strangely structured. It was hardly wider than Hagrid's Hut at Hogwarts. However, that was

its only *normal* feature. The island was not floating on lake's surface but hovering a foot above it. There were no trees or shrubbery on the island, except for soft earth and a central basin, in which soft greenish flames were roaring. Four medium-sized, irregular shaped rocks were strategically floating at the corners of the island, as if supporting it on air with the help of invisible strings.

Harry exchanged quizzical looks with Ginny, and started for the island.

"I don't think we should go beneath it," Ginny said uncertainly, looking closely at the shadow of the island.

Harry concurred, and hoisted himself up at the island, expecting some darts to come slicing the air, but nothing such happened. Seeing the clear ground, he heaved Ginny up beside himself.

They lay there panting for some time, taking deep breathes, not saying anything. It seemed that more they explored this new world, the more they became baffled and exhausted with its unique elements.

"What was *that*?" Ginny said shrilly, finally regaining her voice.

"Er... dunno... Some lake being maybe? I hope it's harmless as the giant squid at Hogwarts."

Ginny looked at Harry, as if trying to fathom his naivety. However, looking at his smiling face, she couldn't help do the same.

"Smashing our boat in two? I don't think it was giving out candies." Ginny stood up and tried the drying spell on her clothes, only to shoot reddish sparks at it.

"Aagh!" she yelled in frustration, and peeled off the heavy school-robe that was hanging like a dead thing on her torso.

"Does anything work around here?" Harry said disgruntled, while peeling off his own robe. "How are we supposed to ward off the guardian, if we don't know which spells would work?" He squeezed the water from his sweatshirt, and flapped it a little to help it dry.

"This is ridiculous!" Ginny said, loosening her uniform tie, and then rolled her sleeves up to start fidgeting with her shoes.

"You can say that again!" Harry took off his shoes, and let the water run out of it. His socks were too soggy to wear again, so he threw them in the lake. "Might as well warm some fishies."

Ginny followed suit and threw her tie in as well. "We lost all our supplies," Ginny pattered on, angrily. The loss of water-skin and fruits reminded her of other important possessions. "D'you still have everything in your cloak, Harry?"

Harry snatched at his robe and checked his invisibility cloak, while Ginny tried her best to make her clothes dry. Harry sighed in relief to find everything where he had left them, including Dumbledore's given orb.

"*'Use it when there's no other way out,'* right?" Ginny said inquisitively, looking at the orb which was swirling some unknown orange-yellow matter.

"How did you...?" Harry realized his fault, and then added sheepishly, "Oh, you were there...." He shrank everything again—after giving Sirius's diary a last sidelong glance—and pocketed it.

"Right. And Dumbledore can be real cryptic sometimes."

"Tell me about it!" Harry raised his eyebrows, and shared a grin with Ginny.

Harry couldn't help thinking that how convenient all of this had turned out. He wanted to be with Ginny, to understand her more, and he was given just that. If he took out the whole dangerous bit—Scroll Guardian looming over their heads as a death omen; Voldemort being his greedy self, trying the best to get his hands on the Vita Scroll—everything else was going rather smoothly. Why, Ginny's freckles seemed as if they were shrinking back.

"Ginny..."

She was too engrossed with the stone basin to hear his voice.

“I think we just have to feel it...” And without a backward glance, Ginny went forward and touched the smoldering green flames.

“I don’t think you ought to touch—” Harry blinked to see no Ginny standing beside the basin. There she was and then she wasn’t. It was as though she had been sucked into the basin.

Panic-stricken, Harry bolted towards the sinister flames, and without even thinking through, he touched it. *What the—*

Harry felt a familiar tugging as he started spinning on an unknown axis, while his insides squirmed threateningly. And without even a warning, he was plunged into what seemed to be an endless bottom, which actually turned out to be the deep underside of the lake.

He swore expletives, only to issue numerous bubbles out of his mouth. He was flapping about indignantly, when a bubble covered his head. Ginny was swimming just beside him, and had an identical bubble on her head.

*Bubbly-head Charm. I should’ve thought of that!* Harry groaned internally, while said, “Thanks,” externally—which came out a little muffled. The message got across though, as Ginny nodded at him.

Harry looked around to find a clear bottom, devoid of the usual plant-life that’s found at such habitat—at least as he had noted beneath Hogwarts Lake , which was rife with exotic magical creatures including the Merpeople.

In this lake however, only few fishes moved about; nothing big enough to get them moving from their current spot.

Just like the suspended island, nothing of any importance was visible from where they were. Not even a basin or an arrow containing a sign: *Aqua Scroll, Here*. Only an irregular earth welcomed them sullenly.

“Any bright ideas?” he asked Ginny, taking out his wand.

“It *is* the water scroll... So, maybe it’s somewhere deep in here?” Ginny mouthed.

“And you think the guardian’s going to help us dig around?” Harry looked at her questioningly.

“No—”

Just then, the same strong light that had caused their boats’ ruin—however old it was—blinded them, yet again. The small fishes scampered out of the light so fast that Harry thought they must have Apparated out. The lake surrounding them seemed to shudder with an unknown force; Harry could only stay at one point if he flailed his legs repeatedly.

*“WHO DARES TO INTERRUPT MY SLUMBER?”* A booming voice yelled.

“Harry, I can’t see!” Ginny was clutching at his arm, sounding panicked.

“Can’t you hear him speak?” Harry asked, bewildered.

“Hear *what*? I can’t hear a thing!”

*“What have we here? A sssaucy breakfassst!”* An interested rumble followed.

*“That voice.”* Harry gestured towards the light, while trying his best to make Ginny understand. Their head-bubbles were touching and still they could only hear each other, faintly.

*“You have ssstolen a ssscroll, eh? You’re not getting thisss one though. Oh NO!”*

It suddenly dawned on Harry that the voice was not speaking in English, but in Parseltongue. He should have understood that, by the speaker’s emphasis on hissing. He squinted his eyes beady, and discovered that the intense light was actually coming off from the profile of a giant snake.

*“Are you the guardian of Aqua Scroll?”* Harry asked in Parseltongue.



There was silence, as if the guardian was thinking through that particular information.

*“You ssseem well-informed... How isss it that you understand me, human?”*

*“I’m a Parselmouth, I can talk to snakes; so what kind are you?”* Harry asked, offhandedly, puzzling the guardian even more, as if he was asking for the direction to the nearest bistro—in their case, the location of Aqua Scroll.

*“I’m a Sssea Ssserpent. And even if you can underssstand me, it doesssn’t mean that I will give the ssscroll to you. Oh NO!”*

“What’s happening?” Ginny demanded to know.

“That’s a Sea Serpent,” Harry gestured towards the light, “the guardian of Aqua Scroll.”

“So, that’s why you were hissing? Why can’t I see it?”

*“How can we believe that you’re ‘the guardian’? For all we know, you could be a reckless spirit...”* Harry ploughed on, bravely.

*“Do I look like a ssspirit to you, human? Have you no eyesss?”* His voice sounded angry, while the light coming off it pulsed more brightly.

*“There’s so much light? I really can’t see you,”* Harry told the truth.

*“This isss my halo, human. It worksss in the night.”*—The brightness seemed to diminish—*“If you ssstill can’t sssee me, you’re blind asss a frog ssspawn!”*

Harry noticed the decreasing brightness as well, just as the lake around them lightened with the daylight of Caeli, as the irregular waves stopped. Now, he could easily make out a snake head which was protruding from the lake floor, while half of its body looked buried under the earth. He also understood

Hearing Ginny's gasp, Harry was assured that she was able to see the guardian as well. Maybe the entire light bit was another quirk of Ursula's world.

The Sea Serpent was pearly white, even when the daylight started flitting in the lake; the serpent's skin seemed to glow with its own radiance. Two bulging eyes stared at them, dominated by white and such narrow slits that it was barely visible. A wide jaw bared a fanged mouth, with two prominent fangs sticking out in the middle; slithering out of which was a grotesque, red, forked tongue. A crown of silver hair decorated its head, which seemed to stretch to its entire body length, even if half of it looked buried in the soft earth of the lake.

*"Who you got there?"* The serpent looked closely at Ginny. *"Another flesshy meal..."* His forked tongue slithered in and out, while he hissed jubilantly. *"Today'sss my lucky day!"*

*"Not so fast, my fanged friend."* Harry swam a little away from the spot—pulling Ginny along—only to be alarmed by the gliding serpent that came whirling towards him like a shot arrow.

Now, its whole body was exposed and Harry could easily guess that it was around twenty-five to thirty feet. It loosely coiled around them, as if getting ready to pounce.

*"You'd be sorry when I'm through."* Harry glared at the serpent, while internally he was nearing the state of alarm. *"I've got Ursula's heir with me: Ginny Weasley."*

The serpent's body went rigid. *"What did you sssay?"*

*"The heir to the Vita Scroll, right here with me."*

Ginny could only smile meekly at it.

The guardian hissed angrily and for quite sometime, before uncoiling itself from around them, facing away. *"Ursssula' ssshadow! Ssshe' sssuch a witch"*

*"I don't blame you two, understand."* The serpent glided around them as if trying to find words to explain himself.

*"I've been guarding thisss ssscroll for hundred of yearsss, and when finally sssomeone encroachesss upon it, I can't eat them."* Serpent's eyes looked forlorn.

Harry couldn't help but sympathize, remembering the basilisk of the Chamber of Secrets that had been cooped up there for centuries—not that he felt sorry for the basilisk—but the sea serpent sure deserved some reward for guarding the scroll for such a long time.

*"I don't think Ursula was cruel. She must've done something for your... er... food?"*

*"Of courssse."* The Serpent looked at him. *"I wasss a free ssserpent once, mostly found in the Atlantic, when sssome evil wizardsss thought that I would make a great pet in destroying a city near the ocean. If it weren't for Ursssula, I would've been wheedled to do sssome terrible thingsss."*—The serpent shuddered—*"I pledged myssself to her from then on. Ssshe was the greatessst Sssorceressss I ever met."*

*"How did you live so long, though?"* Harry asked.

*"I'm not actually living."* The serpent glided near them. *"I knew I would' have to wait for centuriesss before anybody would come to claim the ssscroll. Just asss the rest of the three guardiansss, did..."*

*"Would you care to translate to the heirssship what I am sssaying?"*

*"Of course."* Harry repeated sea serpent's tale to Ginny, who nodded thoughtfully.

*"Ssshe needsss to know. All the guardiansss are ssspiritsss of creaturesss that had great ssstrength and resssolve. Ursssula ssshared a deep bond with all of ussss, which wasss the reassson of trusssting usss with sssuch great resssponsssibilitiesss. The guardiansss are heirssship's attendantsss, and will alwaysss help her."*

*"What d'you mean?"*

As if not hearing what he asked, the serpent continued, *"I knew ssshe wasss the one when I looked at her; I sssenssssed her blood. I wasss only ssstalling. You sssee, I haven't talked to another sssoul for centuriesss..."* His red tongue came out once to show his sadness.

"Can you ask him, if he knows something about the other scrolls?" Ginny prodded Harry.

*"D'you know where we can find the other two scrolls?"*

*"I do not know,"* the serpent replied, sadly. *"I only guard the charge I have given. However, ssshe' the heir and ssshe'll know what to do. That'sss all I know."*

The serpent burrowed into the soft earth of the lake, that only its pointed tail was visible. Harry felt a sudden wave of shifting earth beneath him. He grabbed Ginny's hand and swam away from there in time, just as the serpent's head jutted out from there. This time, it had a glimmering scroll between its jaws. Its forked tongue presented the scroll to Ginny, who humbly accepted it.

*"Here'sss the ssscroll. And my duty isss complete..."*

Harry wanted to ask so many questions, but the serpent didn't seem in the mood of answering. As it curled itself around them, he hissed reassuringly that it was only to transport them back to lake's surface.

Ginny gripped Harry's waist while he did the same. He could see that Ginny was clutching the scroll as if her life dependent upon it. They huddled together, against the current that the whirling body of the sea serpent was producing.

Just as the serpent coiled tighter around them, the whirling built to a pitch that everything around them hazed out. Harry felt a liftoff and weightlessness as if suspended in air.

As promised, in an instant they were floating on the lake surface. With a final hiss of, *"I leave you now. But, I will sssee you sssoon..."* the serpent's body transformed into a tiny light, lifted up, towards the violet sky, and vanished out of sight.

Harry looked around for the suspended island, but couldn't see it. Either it had sunk or the serpent had left them at some other lakeshore of Caeli, both sides of which were covered with thick, dense, but familiar trees of the forest that they had visited before. Harry craned his neck to find the central mountain; seeing it on his right, with a sigh of relief, he made for the nearest shore.

"So much for being dry!" Ginny groped her way out of the lake, while clutching the scroll in one hand, her wand in the other. She turned around and heaped into an odd angle of legs and arms on the grass, panting.

Harry followed suit, as he lay breathless and extremely hungry beside Ginny. "What's the deal? Why do I feel so hungry?" He massaged his growling stomach.

"Merlin's beard! I feel the same."

"You stay put, I'll bring some fruits," Harry said, just as he spied a welcoming bunch of red, plump fruits, on the nearest tree that he could see while lying on his back.

That particular tree had yellow, strangely patterned leaves. Harry shot few red sparks at the fruits and a bunch of them fell off. Harry collected them in a handkerchief—which was still soggy—and brought them back to where Ginny was still resting.

Darkness fell again and they had to light their wands to see what they were actually eating. As it turned out, the fruit had a conical seed in between, and tasted like a sweetened peach. They gorged on them silently—liking its sweet aroma and how it filled their ravenous stomachs—while enjoying a nice breeze and the continuously changing night-sky.

After eating her share of her fruits, Ginny stood up, stretched, and then crouched down beside the lake to drink some water by lapping at the lake's surface. It seemed a good idea to Harry, so he did the same, following suit.

Still, after he had done so, Harry felt an unease settle over his mind; he just knew that he shouldn't have done that. *But, it doesn't seem wrong...*

***It does!*** the voice of reason in his head replied hotly.

"I feel so sleepy, Harry. D'you know what we should do?" Ginny plopped down beside him, her eyes drooping slightly. "D'you think this world is rubbing us the wrong way?"

She looked vulnerable in the wand-light. Even when she was shrunk like a cold cat, wet to her bones, her brilliant brown eyes seemed to light her whole aura—making her totally irresistible. The only thing that came in his mind that instance was to kiss her senseless then and there.

***Have you lost your marbles?*** the same voice of reason chastised, just as he was moving close to her, while she stared above at the changing arches in the sky.

However, before he could do anything embarrassing—to his conscience's relief—he toppled to his side in a comatose sleep.

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When Harry woke up, he distinctly felt that something was not right. The world around him was blaringly hazy.

Few moments passed.

He couldn't remember *where* he was, or even *who* he was. He shot to a sitting position in alarm, and felt for something, *anything*, at his sides for a clue, when his hands came in contact with something cold, yet familiar. It was *his* spectacles; he remembered with relief. Only touching them, made the recognition stronger. As he put them on, his memory, slowly but steadily, came back to him.

He closed his eyes, and whispered, "*I'm Harry Potter, son of James and Lily Potter,*" making sure that he remembered everything clearly.

He shook his head in a dumbfounded way; he couldn't believe how he could have forgotten about *himself*.

He opened his eyes to check on Ginny, when he noticed another peculiar thing. A blue fire was roaring in a corner, just beneath the tree he had picked the fruits from, yesterday. He wouldn't have been alarmed at its sight, if only Ginny hadn't been so laden with sleep that she looked totally out cold, lying face down, while her shoulders rose and fell with rhythmic breathing.

"I've been waiting for you," A voice beckoned.

Harry spun so fast that his neck cricked.

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## Chapter 30 – Umbra Fanum

(Translation: *The Shadow Temple*)

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A strange looking old man was staring right at Harry. He was wearing wire-rimmed spectacles, through which a pair of bright yellowish eyes peered at him. He had a certain rangy, loping grace even though he walked with a slight limp towards him.

“Who are you?” Harry pointed his wand at the stranger, taking in his blue-tinged skin.

“Sorry, I couldn’t introduce myself sooner, Harry. I’m Caradoc Dearborn.”

A flicker of recognition passed through Harry’s mind, as he tried to remember where he had heard the name before. “Do I know you?”

“I don’t think so... Would it be sufficient if I say, Dumbledore sent his regards?”

“You’ve to do better than that.” Harry’s wand-hand didn’t even flinch.

Ginny stirred with the sound of their voices, and finally woke up issuing a moan, and then a surprised gasp.

“It’s all right, Ginny,” Harry comforted her—still pointing his wand at Caradoc—as she took deep breathes and looked wildly around herself. It was then he observed the new auburn streaks that highlighted her hair.

“You both have changed,” Caradoc pronounced ominously.

“What d’you mean?” Harry gazed at Caradoc, perplexed. Without waiting for an answer, he crouched down beside the lake, and looked at his reflection.

Harry gasped, noticing the grassy-green streak in his own black hair, which stood out creepily on his head. His skin looked paler; hair, wilder still—as though it was possible to be more so. Two pointed



ears poked out of his unruly mane. He wriggled them, touched them to making sure that they were *his*. They felt his but their shape had gone through quite a change in his short sleep.

“What’s happening to,”—He looked at Ginny, noticing her pointed ears as well, along the identical pale skin—“us?”

“If you don’t watch out, you can forget your past and become a Caelian being.”

“Can’t you speak in English?” Ginny spat irately. She seemed to regain herself, as she, too, pointed her wand at Caradoc. “I didn’t catch your name.”

The Drifter in turn, seemed highly amused by all this. “I’m Caradoc Dearborn, Ginny. I’m here to... well, help you two along.”

Looking at their arrested expressions, he continued, “Your great-great-grandmother had a sense of humor, I suppose. She fashioned this world so securely, that even if some being was successful in entering it, by the time he, or she, actually knew what they were supposed to do to acquire the Vita Scroll, they forget their past life, and why they had come to Caeli. You see, the more you eat and drink of Caeli, the more it grows on you.”

Getting no response out of them, he went on, “Don’t tell me, you two had pointed ears from birth? Haven’t any of you done something that you’d rather forget? Or got embarrassed *after* you did it?”

Harry and Ginny looked at each other, both red in the face.

“Er... No—”

“Nothing, really—”

Both started at the same time but paused as they remembered their last night.

Ginny’s eyes dilated. “I drank the water like an *animal*!”

"I did the same, and—" Harry stifled the rest of the words; he was sure that confessing what he wanted to do with Ginny was totally inappropriate.

"How d'you know all this?" Harry looked at Caradoc with suspicion. "Has Dumbledore actually sent you, or you're one of Voldemort's minions?"

"How can we possibly trust you?" Ginny piped in.

"Because I am the one who sent you two here in the first place... And I'd die before submitting to Voldemort," he spat vehemently.

"It was *you*!" Harry's eyes popped. "How could you Poly-Juice into the young Sirius?"

"I'm a Shapeshifter, Harry, I didn't Poly-Juice." Caradoc took a deep breath and began his tale, the same one he had reported in Dumbledore's office—only with one exception; he didn't mention anything about the Ulterian Mages' prediction about the heir of scroll, and how the heir was deemed to die in a strange battle. He did the talking as quickly as he could, as the time was running out of their hands.

In the course of Caradoc's account, Harry and Ginny paced about while listening closely. Their clothes were finally dry, and if they were hungry again, they curbed their want with resolve and took in the troves of information that Caradoc heaped on them.

Just as he finished, Harry added with an amused expression, "I remember now. You're that bright-eyed boy I saw in Sirius's memory..."

"Yes, I was in the same year as your parents and godfather. I look older than my years because of time spent in Taita."

Harry and Ginny were doing their own share of deep thinking.

"That's why your skin's all funny?" Ginny asked.

“No. This is all Livor’s doing. I’m not allowed here, as I’m neither the heir nor a Scroll Bearer. But, being a Drifter allows me to enter Caeli.”

“D’you know what we ought to do?” Ginny asked gullibly.

“Almost. The Mages of Taita had been very generous when they taught me their magic. They also imparted me with a lot of knowledge. I’m here, because I was supposed to be here.”

“Was there a prophecy?” Harry asked, curiously; his mind working on the possibility of another cryptic prophecy regarding his fate.

“No.” Caradoc looked at him strangely. “You can call it a premonition given by the Mages of Ulterius.”

“Right... So, Voldemort has the other two scrolls... And he can still use them? How?”

“That’s what I’m going to teach you. It’s not that difficult, really.”

“Do you know anything about some spells not working here?” Ginny asked quizzically.

“Yes, as a matter of fact, I do. Conjuring spells wouldn’t work because the main principles of this world are not like earth’s; there’s no center of gravity here. Ursula imitated the main principles of earth here—*not* the real thing, though. Except conjuring, every other spell will work. Just don’t expect water to come shooting from your wands.”

“There goes my Shield Charm,” Harry said forlornly. As if noticing for the first time, he looked at the blue fire, roaring beneath the tree. “Then how did you—?”

“Livor, right?” Ginny answered for Caradoc.

“Precisely!” Caradoc beamed at her.

“That means I can still use my Bat Boogey. Yes!” Ginny grinned.

"*That* would be interesting to watch." Harry smiled at her. As an afterthought he added, "I can bet Ron and Hermione would give anything to be here."

"They'll take out *that* frustration on each other." Ginny shook her head sadly. She knew for a fact what that always led to: their rowing for the umpteenth time.

"We must prepare," Caradoc interrupted, looking at the sky which was darkening again. "Time's slipping by, and we can't afford to lose it."

The other two followed his gaze and groaned.

"Oh no!" Ginny moaned, while Harry made a face.

"Another day wasted!" Harry kicked at the ground.

"Not a waste. We still have time. Not much, but we'll manage. You're at your initial stages of transformation, and if you don't eat much of here, Caeli wouldn't grow on you."

Only the mention of eating made Harry's stomach growl. "How can we survive without food?" His stomach gave a horrible turn.

"If you pace yourselves right, and only drink water; transformation would be minimal." Caradoc plucked three large leaves, and passed them two, while with the third one he drank some water off the lake.

"This transformation is not permanent, is it?" Ginny asked nervously.

"No. As soon as you'll leave Caeli, you'll turn back to your real-self; however you can't backtrack in time. You'd be older than before. As you're spending only a month here however, you'd only be a month older in your own time.

"We need to act fast. I know Voldemort's lurking about somewhere." He stared at them grimly. "Face it; he has the other two scrolls. Without him, the fusion wouldn't be possible."

“You don’t mean...?” Ginny’s heart thumped in her chest. She still had nightmares about Tom Riddle.

“Ultimately, to get the scroll, you would’ve to duel Voldemort. To possess the Vita Scroll you have to overpower Voldemort, keeping in mind that he can do vice versa. Of course, I’ll be helping along as well.

“On the upside we’re on the better side because Voldemort can’t bring his Death Eaters here. They’ll die if they try to enter.”—Harry remembered the painful shrieks of a Death Eater, who got sucked into the portal in the Platform Nine and Three-Quarters—“It would be him and the forces of the scroll. So, if I see correctly, we have a good chance in winning this battle. We just need to act fast enough.” The urgency in his voice rubbed them too.

“Is there anything that you’re *not* telling us?” Ginny asked shrewdly.

A strange expression came over Caradoc. “Truthfully speaking, no one really knows what’s in the future. Even prophecies go astray with time. I’m only guided by the Ulterian Mages’ prediction. Nothing more.”

“What forces are you talking about?” Harry asked.

“I’m told that the temple possesses all the forces that Ursula gathered in her life. Some of them were not only used to guard the four disseminated scrolls but for guarding the temple as well. You can deem it the heart of Ursula’s powers.”

“Let’s get on it then,” Harry said with resolve. “I don’t want to sprout a tail by lazing around here.”

“That’s the spirit,” Caradoc nodded at him. “For the best and fastest transport, Ventosus Scroll would help.” He signaled Harry to take it out. “Trust me; I’m not going to run for it.”

“Should I take out the other one as well?” Ginny asked.

“Of course, practicing is what you two have to do.”

They both nodded and took out the scrolls.

Caradoc took the Ventosus Scroll first and opened it, while the other two peered at it by standing on either side of him. There were strange letterings inside it. Caradoc took out his wand—which seemed to be made out of liquid metal that shifted continuously, giving it an ever-shining, molten look—and pointed it at the scroll. A soft blue light came out of it, showering the scroll. Some letters became prominent, while Caradoc's eyes roved around them. Then he repeated the same procedure with Aqua Scroll.

Harry noticed that the letterings were of the same ancient language.

“Well then.” Caradoc folded the scrolls, and rolled the sleeves of his shirt up. “Ginny, grab the Aqua Scroll—no, you don't need to open it—close your eyes and feel its power. Just concentrate your mind so that you could only feel the scroll in your hand...”

Ginny followed his directions, closed his eyes and stood rigid near the lake.

“I feel a vibration...” Ginny muttered.

“Yes! The scroll is analyzing you, and I'm guessing that it recognizes Ursula's blood in you?”

Harry's mouth sagged as the scroll glowed in Ginny's hand. Ginny didn't make another sound, as her feet slowly left the ground. An unseen light flapped her skirt about, while her hair waved dreamily around her face covering the pointed ears. She floated just a foot above the ground, as a yellowish glow surrounded her body, trapping her in its halo.

After a while, slowly as before, her feet touched the ground. She opened her eyes, and without speaking to them, she turned towards the lake. Still grasping the scroll in one hand, she directed the other one at the lake. A wave as tall as Ginny came towards her. She flexed her fingers at it and the wave stopped—suspended above the lake in an arc. Ginny reached at it with her free hand, and the wave fell to the surface in a splash, splattering them all.

“Excellent!” Caradoc’s eyes were shining with pride.

Ginny flushed looking at Harry’s expression.

Harry blinked uncertainly, and stepped forward, as Caradoc looked at him.

“Ready?” Caradoc asked.

“Yeah...”

Harry did as Caradoc had instructed. He grasped the scroll gently and shut his mind to everything else, centering on the scroll. It wasn’t too difficult for him, because of his Occlumency practices. As Harry concentrated hard, the words that had shimmered on the scroll seemed to brighten in his mind. A cold sensation spread throughout, as he felt small tendrils of energy pass through the scroll to every part of his body. He felt his every nerve on alert, a lightness spread from limb to limb as every hair on his body stood on alert as if a wave of electricity was passing through them. In his mind, he saw a whirlwind surrounding him, judging him, scrutinizing him.

Harry didn’t know how long it lasted but another sensation started in his free, right hand. It was as if pulses of energy were gathering in there. Harry opened his eyes to see the upturned faces of Caradoc and Ginny. He was still floating on air—

“*Sitting* on air’s, more like it,” Caradoc grinned at him.

“You know Legilimency as well?” Harry asked.

“Dumbledore’s been kind,” Caradoc answered.

Harry waved his hand, so that the wind around him ceased to support him, and came to the ground. A new feeling of freedom coursed through his body as he felt the air all around him—touching his cheeks, touching his hand, flapping the corner of his shirt that was sticking out of his belt—he felt the Air on his fingertips.

“Now then,” Caradoc said, all business-like. “Let’s head for the Temple.”

“You know where it is?” Harry asked, unbelievably.

“Yes. It’s beyond that mountain.” Caradoc indicated towards the towering central mountain.

“We thought so, too,” Ginny said, looking at it ominously.

“Harry, you’re in best position to transport us there,” Caradoc suggested.

“Right.” Harry nodded, and concentrated his mind to make all of them lift off from the ground. In an instant, the three of them were floating on air.

Ginny was staring at the ground. “It’s like I’m flying on a cloud. Better than broomstick any day!”

Harry grinned at her, while thinking about his Firebolt... Hogwarts... His friends... It was strange, but he felt a certain detachment from the world he had come from. He didn’t know it was Caeli’s influence or his own doing. Still a part of him ached, remembering the numerous turrets of Hogwarts and school-life. Ron and Hermione... *I hope I return soon...*

“Brace yourselves,” Harry warned, as they reached the mountain’s base. He propelled them all towards the arched sky.

With the first rays of violet they landed softly on the mountain top, which was irregular and slanted.

Harry and Ginny stared, transfixed, at the scene beyond the mountain.

A vast land was spread below them, and it looked so picturesque that it gave Harry the impression of facing a highly stylized oil painting. It was decorated with lengthy grass, glowing orange trees and flowerbeds—which were scattered all over the place. In between this strange splendor was an edifice, which looked like a dream castle. It was wholly made up of pearly marble, rectangular in structure with two towers that rose on either side of a central dome made up of glass. Only one entrance was visible, which sent butterflies flying in Harry’s stomach.



He had seen that entrance, just once before. He had also visited this land with his parents.... He looked at the sky to make sure.

And there it was; the same violet sky with an acute difference: an orange halo, which was the remnant of the broken sun of this world.

"That's *Umbra Fanum*; Ursula's Shadow Temple," Caradoc supplied, looking at the temple.

"I've seen this before," Harry croaked, looking at the gleaming magnanimous gate that stretched to the two floors of the temple.

Ginny looked at him strangely. "Me too..." Looking at their quizzical expressions, she continued, "Harry, the day you described what you saw in your vision—the one with your parents—I knew the description was familiar... I've been seeing this temple and this stretch of land, since I could remember—on and off, throughout my childhood—I thought this was a dream place... not real... This year however, along with this imagery, I've been seeing dark things..." Ginny shuddered. "Shadows of dark, terrifying creatures... So many of them..."

"Did you see, from where?" Caradoc asked. "That is, where they exactly are?"

"No... only the impression that they were locked somewhere... Not imprisoned, but sheltered.... I know it doesn't make any sense." Ginny shook her head low.

"Let's go and see what it's really about. I've waited too many years for this." There was sadness, yet a determination in Caradoc's voice.

Harry summoned the wind around them again, and they descended from the mountain in breakneck speed. In a minute they were gliding above the knee-length grass. And with a final thud they reached the entrance of the Shadow Temple.

"It's huge..." Harry squinted above at the dome that reflected the daylight about. The orange halo in the sky brightened the temple so much that it seemed to glow, giving off soft light.

As they approached the gate, under the shadow of the arches flanking the entrance, Harry's stomach twisted into a knot. It was the same gate, which had beasts and creatures of different make and sizes on it; each decorated with ancient scriptures. When Harry's eyes rested on the giant snake, baring its fanged mouth, his scar gave a horrible throb. He closed his eyes and tried to feel where Voldemort was, but couldn't.

Ginny on the other hand, seemed to have forgotten where she was. Except for the gate in front of her, everything else mellowed out. She seemed to be floating in the unknown whispers of her dreams.

As if in a trance, she extended her hand; reaching out inch by inch, fingertips journeying across the landscape of the ancient door, touching knot and holes as deep as crates, following wandering warps on its cold surface. The whispering grew to a pitch that she cringed away from the sound. She had her eyes clamped shut—her sweeping hands continued discovering every now and then a new shape, a new form—when she heard a distinct whisper, faint but still audible. The words seemed to grow as a rushing wind deafened her ears. Her drifting hands became stationary, and she bowed her head that her chin touched her collarbones.

It seemed as though thousand voices were chanting together, calling to her attention. Many voices mingled together to form unintelligible words.

*I don't understand any of you!* Ginny thought, creasing her brows in frustration.

With the building whispers and chants, an unearthly voice, which seemed to be the mingled voices of thousand creatures, murmured in her ear:

*"Everything's predetermined;*

*We watch and we wait...*

*The vision shall be fulfilled,*

*Unless the debt be repaid."*

With that, the gigantic door slid open with a loud creak. The whispering stopped, so did the whooshing wind. Ginny noted that only the right halve, which she had been leaning on, had opened.

With opening of the gate, flame torches blazed to life, showing them a bright entrance room—the same room Harry had seen his parents in his vision.

“Did you hear that?” Ginny was panting, as though she had run a marathon race, while she looked searchingly at Harry and Caradoc.

Both of them shook their heads. So, Ginny repeated what she had heard.

*“Everything’s predetermined;*

*We watch and we wait...*

*The vision shall be fulfilled,*

*Unless the debt be repaid.”*

Harry took in all the details, while Caradoc scratched his chin thoughtfully.

“What kind of debt? Is it Ursula’s debt? Debt of what?” Too many questions were queuing inside Harry’s mind for his own dismay.

Ginny shrugged her shoulders bewildered as they entered the room.

“The Watchgate must have recognized Ginny as the heir. That’s why we couldn’t hear it. Maybe its imparting to you, what’s to come?” Caradoc suggested.

“I don’t see anything except for the shadowy shapes that had haunted my dreams for some time...” Ginny pressed her temples for some concentration.

“What’s a Watchgate though? Does this have anything to do with, ‘*We watch and we wait*’?” Harry asked sharply.

“See for yourself, Harry. This gate is full of creatures. I reckon these are the forces that the Elder told me about.” Caradoc looked at Ginny. “Did you see these creatures in your dreams, Ginny?”

Along with Harry, Ginny muttered “Yeah...” as they both went closer to examine the Watchgate.

Harry, like his mother, traced the different shapes of creatures that glimmered on the door—seeming to dance with the flickering light of the torches. He clearly recognized two Dragons, a Unicorn, an unusually large Clawed Fish, a Chimaera, a Manticore... His fingers stopped just before reaching the giant snake with its fanged mouth bared; its eyes mockingly gleaming with the flames.

Ginny however was staring fixatedly at the gate halve, which was still closed. “They are staring right at us!” Her voice was high-pitched.

“Who are, Ginny?” Caradoc followed her gaze, only to find the cold stone-creatures of the gate, staring unblinkingly back.

“I don’t like this bunch. They are sniggering, their pointed teeth showing!”

Harry tried to fathom what she was talking about, only to see the same old gate, unchanged, unmoving.

“Let’s get a move on,” Harry nudged Ginny away from the gate. He, himself, was feeling a lot of nerves. Something about this temple rubbed him wrongly and he didn’t understand what it was. He was feeling uneasy by the second.

Just as Ginny passed the first torch-flame, the marble beneath her lighted. “What—”

The corridor that seemed to lead to the central dome, blazed with unseen light that the walls themselves glowed; it was as though each marble block had florescence inside them.

“This didn’t happen when my parents came.” Harry could easily remember that his parents had followed a dark tunnel to the entrance hall.

“James and Lily were only the bearers of a scroll. Perhaps this is the welcome gesture for the heir?”

“Looks like it.” Harry ambled on, looking sideways.

Ginny grabbed his hand, as she looked back the last time. *“I don’t have a good feeling about this, Harry,”* she whispered to him.

“Me neither, but we’ve got to do this...” Harry faltered, as he looked at the doorway that seemed to lead to an expansive hall. Harry could easily make out a single light source in the hall, coming off a similar basin that he had seen on the suspended island. The light in this case however was magnificent white.

Just as they entered the chamber of the temple, Harry’s scar exploded with such pain that he keeled over the floor. Through the haze of searing pain, he made out a shape that was standing just beside the central basin. Harry knew who it was before he even spoke.

“Ah... I’ve been expecting *you*,” a cold voice brandished, with an essence of a lashing whip.

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## Chapter 31 – Shadows of the Watchgate

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When Ginny entered the temple, lights flooded it—just like when she had stepped into the corridor leading to this chamber. The temple they had thought to be two-storied, turned out to have a broad roof, crowned with a central glass-dome.

In the expansive lengths of the hall, surrounding the central basin, four stone-statues of giant, black panthers sat, with amber flaming eyes, flanked by uncountable arches and columns. The four guardian panthers, in perpetual sitting position, were staring off into distant space, with eyes that blazed out of their sockets.

Ginny didn't linger on these details however, because what she saw as she entered the chamber along Harry turned her blood cold to ice. The one she feared for years, the one whose younger-self had haunted her dreams, Voldemort—the one whose mere name induced fear in the wizarding folk—was standing beside the central basin. His snakelike face; his thin lips, contracted into a superior smile, enjoying the shaking figure of Harry; his crimson eyes; all these horrific details came into light with the sudden brightness that swamped the chamber; making her dizzy with trepidation.

However Harry had described him, looking at him directly for the first time, twisted Ginny's stomach into a horrible knot. She had never seen such a horror. Ever.

"What do we have here? Gentle comrades and a lady?" A cold, mirthless laughter rang in the chamber.

Ginny grasped Harry's shoulder, following Caradoc, who did the same. With determination Harry stood up and shot a hateful glare at Voldemort.

"*Really*, Potter, you never cease to amuse me, with your little tricks, that is. However, they're not going to work this time.

*"Expelliarmus!"*

“Not so fast, Voldemort.” Cardaoc came in between the spell and stopped it with a blue wispy cloud that he shot from his own wand.

Voldemort’s face looked stricken. “And, you are?”

“Don’t you recognize me?” Caradoc questioned him challengingly.

Comprehension dawned on him. “Caradoc Dearborn, is it not? You were the one who stunned Avery and Shapeshifted to his form?” Voldemort stepped forward. “The Unspeakable, who vanished before falling to his doom...? How does it feel to finally face your death, Caradoc? You surely know that you shall die the same death as your friends did, years ago?”

Without waiting for an answer, he went on, “You see, my powers are unrivalled, and you can’t stop them with your puny tricks.” Voldemort clicked his fingers and directed his wand at Caradoc, a violet light shot out of the end of his wand and ate away the blue protective wisp in front of Harry. “Even if you are a Drifter; your powers are no match for the great Lord Voldemort!” His voice boomed in the chamber.

“For starters, we know what you’ve come for. You’ve acquired two scrolls,” Caradoc baited. “I reckon you’d been after it even before the Potters.”

Voldemort glanced at Harry before answering. “It is an amusing tale indeed...” He crisscrossed his spidery fingers in front of his robe, as he moved away from the light of the central basin. “Indeed, I had my eyes on the scroll for some time now...

“You see, Harry,” He fixed his wide, red eyes on him, “instead of getting my mother’s love, I received all the ancient books that were passed onto her by her Pureblood forefathers. One of them contained the secret of the Vita Scroll. Of course, no one knew where it was. With years of research I was finally able to acquire evidence when the Department of Mysteries started researching it. My plans were ruined however, by your do-gooder parents and godfather! How strange it always has been. Our paths had kept on crossing even after that, until it actually ended one fateful day...

“Needless to say, every witch and wizard knows what happened after that. How the bad *You-Know-Who* got what he deserved and the *Boy-Who-Lived* saved the wizarding community, even if his poor parents died saving his life... Oh, how very *touching!*” Voldemort hissed contemptuously as his eyes smoldered with disgust.

“I didn’t asked to be marked! I never wanted all that!” Harry yelled; he was having trouble in controlling his anger, along keeping his mind shut to Voldemort’s intrusions. He knew from the point he had entered the chamber that Voldemort would try his best to use him as a puppet against Ginny. He would not let the creature fasten its coils on him again! With his last breath, he decided to fight this fiend, who called himself the Dark Lord.

“Ah! So the Muggle-loving fool has finally told you about the prophecy?”—Ginny and Caradoc looked quizzically at Harry, but he didn’t notice—“The old man has been quite busy this year. Parading all over the world, and finding time to teach you Occlumency as well? He’s cracked, hasn’t he? Under the schemes I’ve made him run around everywhere...” A satisfactory sneer played along his thin lips.

“He’s the most powerful wizard of this time! DO NOT speak of Dumbledore like this! He knows more than you ever did!”

“You are a sentimental fool like your mother, Harry—”

“WHY do you always have to be so *evil?*” Ginny interrupted her face red with fury.

Voldemort’s red, livid eyes shifted towards her. “Ginevra Weasley, I presume? We haven’t met face-to-face before, but Lucius tells me I’ve left quite an impression on you...” He looked meaningfully at her, while she blanched. “Enjoyed my diary, dear girl?”

Ginny pursed her lips, willing them not to tremble, while Harry clamped his hands on hers to comfort her.

Harry started coldly, “You were always a bully, Voldemort. You must’ve bullied Michael Corner into sending me here. Why don’t we cut to the chase?” His face was contorted with rage. “We know what



you're here for. And let me tell you, whatever you do; it can't be greater than the heir herself!"

"My, my, quite a savior you have become, boy! Already saving damsels in distress?"

"Why don't you just SHUT UP!" Harry had enough, as the frustration he had been feeling since the death of Sirius, boiled to the surface. The whole tormenting year passed through his mind, as he considered his defeat after defeat... The lost Quidditch match... His transformation bungling, just because of too much transference from Voldemort... He was sick to his bones for living under a continuous shadow of doom. He would do something, anything, about this monster in front of him, or die trying!

"Watch that temper of yours, Harry. Very bad for your health." Voldemort sneered at him. "I *will* possess the scroll, and you won't be able to do anything about it. I shall seal my immortality today!"

"We'll see about that!" Harry, who had been nudged by Caradoc to use his scroll, clutched it in his hand, and concentrated hard on Voldemort.

As if smelling trouble, Voldemort took out his two scrolls, and aimed one of his spidery hands towards Harry.

The ground beneath him trembled, for a moment everything became imbalanced. Harry made Caradoc and Ginny hover in the air along him with the Ventosus Scroll, so that the tumbling ground couldn't do them any harm.

Getting the clue, Ginny tried her scroll as well. For a moment nothing happened, which gave enough time to Voldemort to send a glowing fireball at Ginny, which was promptly blocked by Caradoc. In the other second, heavy clouds came ripping the ventilation shafts of the chamber and started smattering every inch of the chamber.

"Foolish girl!" Voldemort cried and raised his hands upwards, as if praying to heavens.

Rain fell harder still. However, it was for only a matter of seconds, because what followed made the rain stop, as Ginny lost her concentration, and went face first towards the ground. Caradoc, in time, caught her before she hit the floor. Her eyes rolled up into her head, while her breath seemed to come fitfully.

“*Ginny!*” Harry shook her, and looked at Voldemort, who seemed to be chanting something under his breath. “What have you done to her, you monster!” he yelled at him, getting no response whatsoever.

Ginny, however, was locked in her own mind, where such locks were opening, the keys of which had been well-protected and hidden in the bloodstream of Weasley family for centuries. The bits of information that had been passed on from gene to gene finally woke up, induced by the familiar atmosphere of the temple made by her ancestor: Ursula Weasley. She didn’t know for how long she remained deep within her mind, but when she opened her eyes, she knew such secrets that had never been accessed before. She knew what she was supposed to do, just as the watchers of the Watchgate had informed her: *Everything’s predetermined...*

Harry’s concerned face swam into view, as she sat up. She looked at Voldemort, around whom some swirling entities were gathering, which made Ginny stand upright swiftly. She signaled at Harry to give her the Ventosus Scroll.

Harry did so. “What happened? Are you OK?”

“I’m fine, Harry. I need to call my watchers. I need to call upon my guardians....”

Harry didn’t understand what she was saying, but from her serious expression, could easily fathom that she knew what she meant to do.

Ginny grasped the two scrolls in her hands, and clutched it close to her heart by crossing her arms above her chest. She closed her eyes, concentrating hard on both the scrolls. She felt Ursula’s blood flowing inside her, watching over her—more than that, she felt as if a part of Ursula that had been saved inside her, spoke along her—as she whispered to the guardians, *“I know all of you are there... I know you watch and you wait... The allegiance that you showed my great*

*ancestor, Ursula Weasley, I request that you show the same to me... I've come as her heir before you, to acquire what is rightfully mine... I want your unwavering loyalty... Don't be swayed into the treacherous path that's been shown to you... Choose the right path... Come forth to the LIGHT!"*

Harry had been beside Ginny, when she finally cried out, "LIGHT!" looking at Voldemort's slow progress of shadows.

For a moment nothing happened—a moment pregnant with too much hope, if there was one—when finally Harry saw tiny balls of light speeding towards her from the corridor. The tiny spheres reminded him of the sphere in which the sea serpent had vanished to after handing the scroll to them, promising that they would meet again.

Caradoc caught Harry's questioning gaze, and nodded at him. "Ginny's calling the forces of Light from the Watchgate." He cocked his head at the corridor.

Harry turned around to see that the tiny lights were bursting out of the Watchgate, and so did the lazy shadows that glided towards Voldemort.

"Voldemort's using all his powers to divide the forces so that he has more creatures than the Lighter Side, to war that is," Caradoc clarified.

Now, Harry understood what kind of war was foreseen. This unique war was not going to be fought over wands but through mystical creatures. He could almost feel something magnetic in the air, as if the whole atmosphere was charged with restless spirits waiting to be set free.

The tiny spheres that danced about Ginny started bursting out, taking form and shape, while Voldemort's creatures seemed to solidify slowly, gliding in a tight circle around him. More light flooded the temple, as the creatures were called from the Watchgate. In a while, the whole temple was reverberating with roars, snarls, and screeches.

Just as the last spirit-shadow solidified near Voldemort, the scrolls of Earth and Fire, that he had been clutching, flew out of his hands to the central basin, which made the scrolls hover vertically over it,

diagonal from each other. Similarly, with a Griffin's screech, last of Ginny's spirit-sphere burst out, and her two scrolls of Water and Air, joined the central basin, hovering diagonally over it.

Now, a whole scroll formed—the first glimpse of the Vita Scroll—with the exception of the cross where they were supposed to fuse, such that a prominent plus sign flashed out of the scrolls. An invisible energy seemed to pass through each scroll, making its different letters highlight alternatively.

Harry gazed at Voldemort's line, which had two gaps in between. Along a lone Dragon, and a Manticore, stood a pair of Saber-toothed Tigers, Clawed Fishes, Chimaeras, Boars, Lethifolds, and Dementors. The same Giant Snake that had made his mother shudder was circling Voldemort still, as if engaged in a highly intellectual discussion with him.

Harry was pleased to see that there was no gap in their own line, which started with a pair of Dragons, Snow Tigers, Bears, Gytrashes, Unicorns, Thestrals, a lone Sphinx, Vampire, Sea Serpent and a Griffin—the last two were obviously the guardian of the scrolls they had obtained.

The whole scene looked bizarre and rather strange. Who would have thought, that the fate of goodness and evil would be decided as savagely as this? Blood to be spilled. Sweat to be leaked. Strength to be fazed. Roars to be unleashed. Screeches to terrorize and dominate... A battle that would raze the roof of this temple teetered on the edge of a beginning, as the creatures in both the lines seemed to solidify. They were not mere shadows anymore but as real as living, breathing, beings.

Harry looked at the gathered army, almost goggling at the magnificent sight. One acute difference that he saw between the creatures of the Light Side from the Dark Side was the color of their eyes; flaming red versus ice blue, both of which seemed to be roaring in respective creature's sockets. All of whom gathered in a line beside their respective leader, showering fire, cold and hot, from their eyes at each other.

Harry doubled back to the Vampire, as his eyes dilated with recognition. It was Marak, the same vampire, who had warned him in a Defense Against the Dark Arts lesson.

“How can you be here?” Harry stepped closer to him.

“Do I know you?” Marak looked at him with his blazing ice-blue eyes.

Harry was taken aback by the answer. How could he not know him, when he, himself, had warned him about the danger to come? Harry stared back at Marak, nonplussed. “Don’t you recognize me? You warned me about something unexpected to come...?”

“From what year are you, little one?” Marak asked, the ice-blue fire softening.

“Er... Nineteen ninety-six,” Harry replied.

“My present self must have contacted you, little one. I was recruited just a hundred years ago... My shadow, that is.”

That, explained quite a lot about Marak’s warning. He must have tried to warn him about Caeli’s effect on humans. He was just about to ask him, how he was in two places at the time, when he was interrupted by a familiar voice.

*“I told you, we ssshall meet again...”* The sea serpent inclined its head towards him, while the Griffin beside it flapped its wings.

Harry recognized the Griffin as the one saved by his mother. The Griffin seemed to be doing his own scrutiny over Harry.

“Everything looks in order.” Voldemort’s voice registered, making Harry look up sharply.

Caradoc, who had been talking to the Sphinx, moved beside Harry, while Ginny finally opened her eyes and stared fixatedly at Voldemort. There seemed to be a new resolve running through the Light Side, even felt by the creatures standing within.

“Not a bad lot, either.” Voldemort sneered arrogantly, while he looked at their army, comparing it with his own.

“You must’ve guessed that the gaps belong to the guardians I have killed. So very loyal they were; however, not so powerful.”

A shudder ran through the Dark Side. Voldemort’s creature seemed to be in his total control.

*“Deceitful, thisss one isss...”* the sea serpent hissed in Harry’s ear.

Harry nodded in agreement, and looked at Ginny, whose face was set boldly. “Ginny, do you know what to do?”

“Yes. Just as Dumbledore explained, a battle will ensue... All of these magnificent creatures will help us in getting the scroll.”

She pressed Harry’s hand, while his mouth went dry. An errant thought suddenly bloomed into his mind: *What if something happens to her... What if I can never say—*

“Good luck, Harry.”

“Er... you too...” There were so many things that he wanted to say to her, but couldn’t make his lips move to say them. *There will be time...* Harry could only hope.

“May the best side win,” Caradoc added grasping both of their shoulders, while staring at the opposite end.

The creatures on both sides pawed and clawed at the floor restlessly. They knew they were soon to be unleashed on each other. They were waiting, as if with abated breath.

And with a single flick of Voldemort’s finger, the Manticore came forward, lashing its scorpion tail about in an arc, snarling in an unearthly twitter. The Sphinx from their side came out and met the Manticore with a steady glare, not making a single noise. Soon, all the creatures were head to head, fighting an anomalous battle.

Harry produced *Prongs* and unleashed him on the Dementors who fell way back. The giant snake seemed to be guarding Voldemort, not participating in the battle. Caradoc and Marak were keeping an eye out for any attacks on Ginny.

Harry moved closer to Voldemort—away from the spot from where Ginny was leading the Light creatures. He was however interrupted by a Chimaera, blocking his path. Harry was only thinking, what he should do about this three-headed beast, when the guardian Griffin came trotting towards him and with one swipe of its steely beak, severed the goat-head of the Chimaera, who went whimpering away.

Harry didn't know that when he would look at the Griffin, he would find his own mother riding it. He blinked, as every sound around him muted, and became insignificant. The only figure he saw was his mother's, staring at him with her emerald eyes—his eyes—riding over the Griffin that had hugged her so lovingly years ago.

*"Mum!"* A strangled whisper escaped his lips, as he pinched himself to make the illusion go away. But the vision didn't waver.

However, Lily Potter did slide out of the Griffin's trunk. Without even uttering a word, she came towards him and hugged him close. *"Oh, Harry!"*

Harry couldn't believe what was happening. *Is this a dream? Did that Chimaera finished me off?* Still, he felt such deep love emanating from her hug that he was forcibly reminded of Mrs. Weasley's rib-cribbing hugs to her children. Aloud, he muttered, "You are not some illusion, are you?"

"Of course not!" Lily let go of him and observed him at an arm's length.

"How come you're here then?" Harry asked, baffled.

"I don't have much time, son..." She looked around urgently.

"I—I saw you! When you visited Caeli with Dad... You can't be alive..." Harry didn't want to sound hopeful, but through the hoarse

croak from which his words came out, it was evident that she understood his query.

Her eyes became misty. "I'm just a shadow, Harry, made to rise again because my blood called me... The creatures will be cornering you soon, and I have just few words to spare, so listen closely... I am here today, son, because I developed a bond of trust with this mystical Griffin."—The Griffin in turn unfurled, and furled its wings—"This creature saved a part of me in itself when he gave me the scroll to protect. When we—your father and I—found out about Caeli, and came here; I discovered my own shadow in the Watchgate. As I'm no creature, I can't be commanded by any side, I still have my freewill. The Griffin, when saw you, called to me, telling me that my own flesh and blood was here. You see, son, I was carrying you when I came here, and that's why you remember all that... because of the close bond we share..."

Her voice broke with emotions as tears welled in her eyes. "I loved you from the moment you were only a speck in my womb, I loved you still when you grew full and strong. I used to talk to you, sing to you, telling you stories of our adventures..."

"So that's how I heard your voice... *'Let those who rest more deeply sleep, Let those awake their vigils keep...?'* It was you, who incanted this, wasn't it?"

"Yes! The protective spell that I used over our house, and to protect you, my son. It is the same spell, we deciphered from Watchgate's core. You see, we loved you so much that we wanted to be close to you, even if we die. You see, my dear child, your father and I, still live inside *you*."

His mother's sweet voice touched his heart so much that tears sprang to his eyes. He felt such an ache for her that he couldn't describe in words, even if he tried, so he grasped her hands and kissed them. "I miss you so much, Mum... If only you were with me, all of this would've been so much easier..."

She hugged him again. "I'm always there with you, Harry! You have my eyes. You can always see my world if you try. We Potters always had a strong bond with our family. Don't forget your strength and



determination. You would be surprised, the things you can make it happen if you use your willpower.”

She had been kissing his forehead, when her form wavered. Harry’s eyes shot open from their half-closed position. The Manticore had stung the Griffin, and the mystical creature was having trouble keeping itself on its paws. Without even saying goodbye his mother’s form ebbed away to nothingness. It was as if everything that had happened in a few minutes had been provoked by his twisted imagination.

He gave a wounded animal cry that burned his throat. “NOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO!”

Blindly, as if his wand was not a piece of wood but a dagger, he slashed it at the beast’s scorpion sting.

With a mad twittering cry, Manticore sank to its forelegs.

Harry opened his eyes to see the bloody sting lying beside the moaning Manticore. He also registered the blood covering his own wand. He didn’t have a clue how he did it. *How could—*

“Harry!”

His head snapped up to see Caradoc’s wounded profile coming towards him. It seemed that some creature had attacked him. With a wave of his wand, Caradoc issued blue smoke from his wand, which covered the Manticore as a swarm. In a second, the Manticore swayed to his left and moved no more; his form became a wisp of smoke and dispersed in air.

“*I am fine!*” Caradoc said, looking at his concerned expressions—Harry doubted it, but didn’t interrupt him. “We need to finish this. Voldemort is gaining on Ginny, even with fewer creatures. We must join forces to vanquish his creatures.”

“But how? I dunno how to...” Harry looked at the basin, where the scrolls seemed to be trapped in a perpetual hovering position. There were some changes in the light though; Harry clearly noticed that the white light was changing to muddy-white.

“Just follow me.” Caradoc came towards him, and seized his right hand fiercely. “I know Voldemort and your wands are brothers, if you duel, the *Priori Incantatem* will come to effect. However, you can channel your energy into mine, and we can both blast at him.”

He took out his steely wand. Up close, Harry saw it continuously changing its malleable form.

“If we directly blast at him now, his strength will waver; his creatures will become more vulnerable to attack.”

They staggered backwards, as their Hungarian Horntail swiped at Voldemort’s Fireball, continuing its chase.

Harry glanced at Ginny, who was still guarded by Marak; she had her eyes closed and it seemed as though, she was leading every creature with her mind.

“I will do a complicated spell,”—Harry snapped back towards Caradoc—“which will drain his energy. What I need you to do, is concentrate with all the might and power you possess; concentrate Voldemort’s power ebbing away from his body, give it your best bloody shot, Harry!”

Harry nodded gravely at him, and firmly gripped Caradoc’s left hand.

“On my mark, Harry.”

Harry closed his eyes and channeled all his hate towards Voldemort, the reason of every bad event in his life.

“Let’s go!” Caradoc swished and flicked his wand twice in triangular motion, and shot an icy blue beam at Voldemort.

Harry was relieved to see Voldemort hiss excruciatingly. His creature’s profile wavered all around them, as the Light Side swung back mightily.

Sputtering, Voldemort glared at Caradoc, as the light of the central basin changed to its original brilliant white.

"I didn't come all this way to be thwarted by a Drifter!" Voldemort shot violet sparks at Caradoc, which seemed to elongate as they traveled towards him. Caradoc used his powerful Livor shield against it, but Voldemort's spell stubbornly stayed put, puncturing holes into the shield.

Before he knew what was happening, a Lethifold stretched and attacked Caradoc. Harry whipped his wand out to perform another Patronus Charm, when Caradoc's shield got perforated by Voldemort's spell and hit him square in the chest. He dropped to all fours, convulsing.

As Harry shot Prongs at the Lethifold, the giant snake came slithering out of the shadows and stung Caradoc's vulnerable leg. Harry tried to reach him, but the snake tenaciously bared its fangs to sting again.

*"LEAVE HIM!"* Harry shouted in Parseltongue. *"LEAVE HIM ALONE! PLEASE!"*

The snake stopped, and looked at him closely.

Harry ran towards Caradoc, who had sprawled on the floor. He was coughing blood and seemed on the verge of losing consciousness.

As Harry's lips formed to say no, seeing Voldemort raising his wand for the finale—what seemed to be Caradoc's last breath, he whispered to Harry, *"R—re-repay the debt..."* and vanished from the spot.

**-x-X-x-**

## Chapter 32 – Debt Repaid

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“Honestly, Ron, it was for our own good!”

“*Hermione*, how can you even say that!”

“Agh! I hate this waiting!” Hermione threw the spoon she was eating with, that clanged with Neville’s pumpkin goblet and splashed the juice all over the table. With one annoying flick of her wand, she cleaned the mess off the table.

Neville, on the other hand, didn’t even look reproachful. He was as worried over Harry and Ginny’s disappearance as the quarreling duo. There hadn’t been any official announcements from Professor Dumbledore. He had found out the whole thing after swearing profusely along Luna that he wouldn’t inform another living soul about it.

Neville had missed Ron and Hermione from morning lessons. He wouldn’t have batted an eyelid over Ron’s disappearance, but he knew for certain that Hermione never missed a class unless she’d been petrified.

When Professor Vidal had failed to show up in his lesson, and Filch had substituted for him—hacking and coughing about the work he had to do around Hogwarts—seeing Ron and Hermione coming out of Dumbledore’s office entrance without Harry, and wearing identical glum expressions had raised his alarm. Not to mention the strange guests that kept on arriving all day. He distinctly recognized many Aurors and their previous *supposed-to-be* Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher, Mad Eye Moody clunking up to Hagrid’s cabin.

However, he had only caught up to Ron and Hermione in the evening near the Hogwarts Lake before sunset.

It was almost unbelievable when he thought for the umpteenth time, that there were worlds beyond this one, and Harry and Ginny had been sent to one of them, along some Drifter—

**CRASH!**

Everyone present in the Great Hall issued a collective gasp, as their heads turned towards the Slytherin table. They were seeing something that had never been recorded in Hogwarts History. Someone dropping in on supper—that is, actually *dropping* from an unknown destination.

The Great Hall suddenly burst with a chattering buzz. *You can't Apparate inside Hogwarts... Do you see any Portkey in his hand...? Who is he...? He's not You-Know-Who, is it...? He's not a Death Eater, right...? Is Peter Pettigrew still alive? WHO IS HE?*

If it weren't for such serious circumstances, Ron would have burst out laughing. Draco Malfoy and his cronies, along with Pansy Parkinson covered with their own supper was a treat for his sore eyes. However, as Ron recognized the person sprawled sideways on the table, his stomach turned horribly. As he sprang from the Gryffindor table along Hermione, Dumbledore had already come down from the High Table.

Dumbledore calmed everyone down. "No need to panic, everyone. He's a guest, not an enemy."

Slytherins left their chairs in such a hurry, as though they were expecting Caradoc's limp body to suddenly spring up from its comatose position, and attack them gnashing his teeth. Draco Malfoy looked highly disgruntled and was about to move out of the Hall when Snape stopped him and other Slytherins from doing so. Along with Professor Flitwick, he cleaned the mess that even splattered their House banners.

The rest of the students were almost jumping on their seats to get a better view of Caradoc, to no avail however, as the teachers covered the scene, while Professor McGonagall specifically made everyone sit and wait, her square spectacles glinting dangerously.

Hermione was bobbing with anticipation beside Ron. If it had been up to her, she would have gone and slapped Caradoc, just to find out what had happened to Harry and Ginny. She exchanged dark looks with Ron and Neville, while even Luna forgot her Quibbler and craned her neck to get a better view.

As if summoned, Madam Pomfrey came bustling in the Hall and along with Professor Dumbledore and McGonagall they started for the Hospital Wing. On a stretcher that Dumbledore conjured, Caradoc's body was shifted from the table. He seemed to be totally out cold, with a gash bloodying one of his arms and a trickle of blood escaping his leg, which was clearly visible as they turned to leave the Hall.

"I've had it!" Seeing, nobody paying them any heed, Ron left his seat at the Gryffindor table—closely followed by Hermione—and made to follow McGonagall, when he was interrupted by Snape.

"Where do you think you're going, Weasley?"

"To the Hospital Wing," Ron answered, glaring at Snape.

"Nobody is allowed to leave the Hall yet, Weasley. Are you that thick that you didn't understand?" From the mocking smile that played across Snape's face, it was evident that he was enjoying himself. "Don't want to lose more house points, now would you?"

"Ron—" Hermione tried to calm him by grabbing at his robes, but he went on doggedly.

Lowering his voice, he said, "I—want—to—know—where—my—sister—and—best—mate—are!" He glared at Snape vehemently. "If you want to dock points, be my guest. Take hundred if you like. I'd love to see your explanation to Professor Dumbledore about it though. Now, clear off the way." Ron's hands were balled into fists.

"Are you threatening me, Weasley?" Snape's silky voice seemed to have a touch of concern.

*"Try me!"* His lips barely moved, but his intentions bounced right off Snape. Hermione hovered in the background uncertainly, not knowing what to do.

Snape seemed to be doing his own calculations. Ron was no mousy boy but a strapping six feet tall adolescent. And even if he was known to be not so good with his wand, his balled fists looked threatening

indeed. However, he was saved the trouble of replying when Vidal cut in.

"I think, we should allow them to go, Severus."

"And what will be the impression on other students, Vidal? Slytherins' dinner was disturbed, if anybody should have the permission to go out; it should be they, *surely*."

"Ron, isn't your leg stinging still?" Vidal asked him, giving him the eye.

"No, Madam Pomfrey patched it—Oh..."—Hermione elbowed him, while he cottoned on—"Oh yes... hurts like knives!" Ron issued a fake moan and leaned heavily on Hermione.

"Let me escort you to the Hospital Wing, we don't need the poison spreading, now do we?" Vidal said loudly, as he departed, throwing a grin at the ashen-faced Snape.

"That was brilliant, Professor!" Ron let go of Hermione and sprinted along him as they climbed the first stairwell.

"I know you two are concerned about Harry and Ginny," Vidal supplied. "Caradoc looked heavily wounded and if I'm not mistaken that was a snake bite on his ankle."

"I wish I had gone with them!" Ron said, screwing up his face.

"Still, we managed to do some official business for the Headmaster," Hermione tried to console him.

"Collecting some herb for stinking Colin? Yeah... loads of fun!" Ron realized late, who he was walking along. "Not that we didn't appreciate the gesture, Professor."

Vidal nodded at him understandingly.

As they went through another corridor, Ron replayed the reasons for his anger. First, he couldn't do a bloody thing about Harry and Ginny being thrown into some crackpot world created by his great-great-grandmother. Second, he didn't get to kick some Death Eater butt

swarming local suburbs of London. Who cared, he was not of age? He had more hand-on experience than a Trainee Auror any day!

Nonetheless, seeing their apprehension Professor Vidal had requested Dumbledore to send them along in his journey to a faraway village in Romania, where a special herb was found that would cure Colin's Eternal Sleep. It seemed whoever had worked over Colin—and most of the fingers were pointing towards Michael Corner—had bewitched him to Eternal Sleep before he could reveal something significant. And obviously, being caught red-handed was one of them.

Ron had only agreed on Hermione's insistence. "At least there will be something to occupy our minds. I just can't stand this *waiting!*"

They had Portkeyed to the village, and returned after a long walk over a mountain and back. He had even managed to get himself stung by a Tropical Tentacula, which was patched up afterwards.

Professor Vidal had tried to entice their interest by pointing towards a Romanian Longhorn that had been resting near the village. Ron for one was no Hagrid, so that monstrous thing didn't interest him. Therefore, he just tuned out the whole journey back, along with a scholarly talk with Vidal in which Hermione engaged herself. He noted her continuous fidgeting hands though, which were a clear sign of her anxiety. They hadn't eaten much at the village Tavern either.

Returning to Hogwarts, they had found out that along the Order, the Ministry Auror had handled the Death Eater situation along the memory modification of the local Muggles. Finding nothing to do, they had haunted their usual spot near the lake, where Neville and Luna had caught up to them. By that time, Ron had become surly again. Of course, as always, Hermione had another view altogether.

"A lot of good that did!" Ron had barked at her.

"He's a Gryffindor, Ron..."

"He's a murdering traitor! Just like my stupid pet Scabbers, that *Pettigrew*," he had barked, furious still, "He's the reason Harry's an orphan. He also has more than a hand in Voldemort's return. AND, he betrayed his *friends!* Who in their right minds would do such a



thing? So, don't tell me I should be nicer to Colin because he's *disturbed!*"

"I think something happened to him, Ron. He was annoying, but he did admire Harry to death..." Hermione had replied delicately.

"I dunno... I'm just sick of all these backstabbing people all around us... That's all."

After which they had just sat there for a while, silently staring at the starry night sky.

"I just can't put up with the fact that those two are fighting Voldemort by themselves, and we're sitting here, doing *no-bloody-thing!*" Ron bellowed out loud in frustration, while Hermione gave a dry sob.

Vidal however grabbed his shoulder and steered him to the last corridor, leading to the infirmary, when they saw Dumbledore and McGonagall coming out of there.

Ron's mouth went dry looking at Dumbledore's expression which was more than worried, it was bordering on troubled. He had already been feeling useless the whole day, and now *this!*

"Professor...?" Hermione started timidly.

"What are you doing here, Miss Granger?" Professor McGonagall asked.

"It's all right, Minerva," Dumbledore said, "They have a right to be here." Turning towards Vidal, he said, "Tarziah, why don't you run ahead, and call Remus Lupin for me?"

Nodding, Professor Vidal turned on his heels, while Ron and Hermione walked beside Dumbledore. They silently made their way to the Headmaster's office.

Hermione was grasping Ron's hand so fiercely that he had lost feeling in it; however, he didn't scold her off. Just as they entered the office, Remus Lupin came out of the fireplace.

“Remus, I must go. There’s no other choice. I have to go to Caeli.”

“Dumbledore, you can’t!” Lupin faltered looking at Dumbledore’s worried expression. “Wh-what happened?”

“Caradoc has returned without them... I can’t let anything happen to... I will—”

At that exact moment, the whole office shook as if in an earthquake. Ron looked on, gaping at a thin seam appearing on the wall beside the fireplace. A gash of orange material widened, and it was expanding, blinding them with intense light.

**-X-**

Harry stared at the empty spot, where Caradoc had just been, as if staring at it would materialize him back. Sadly, nothing such happened. He was forced to look up at the satisfied face of Voldemort, which was positively beaming over his triumph.

All around them, the atypical battle continued. The Lighter Side had definitely gained with the blast that Caradoc helped produce. Still, fire was breathed, stings were raised and launched, claws dug and ripped, teeth gnawed and tore, heads banged, roars rent the air, blood spilled, pain was felt and given... The mêlée continued nonetheless, reaching fever pitch with every growl and rumble.

Ginny came running towards him, it seemed that she just realized what had happened. Harry looked at her blankly, expecting the worst. Now that he thought about it, he hadn’t seen Caradoc enter Caeli, so he didn’t know that he had either vanished to some place, or shapeshifted to it.

“What happened to Caradoc?” Ginny stared at the horrified expression on Harry’s face.

“Your savior’s gone, little girl,” Voldemort hissed approvingly. “You’re now left with this useless boy who can’t even close his mind from me!”

At that weak moment, Harry's head split with such searing pain that he had never experienced. His knees gave away from beneath him. He gripped his head; it felt as though it was a melon and would burst if he let go. It seemed that a gigantic hammer was pounding at his brains, while Voldemort clenched his consciousness.

"STOP IT!" Ginny screamed, only to increase Voldemort's laughter.

"Harry! Don't let him through!"

"Giiinnniii—run! Run as far away from me as you can!"

"NO! I won't leave you like this!" she retorted adamantly.

"Harry! You've to accept what you *are* because unless you do, you'd always have doubts and could never defeat *him*," Ginny implored. "Ursula told me to accept who I am and call to my watchers, and they came! Don't you see? You only need to accept it that you can overcome Voldemort. Don't hesitate, Harry... please... Do what you *know*. Do what you know, you *can* do!"

Even if her words came to him jumbled, Harry got its gist, and such a liberating emotion gripped his heart that the creature which seemed to coil around his mind, loosened its grip, shrinking away from his welling emotions until it was no more.

Harry stood up and looked directly at Voldemort with a new determination, while his mother's voice echoed inside his mind... *The protective spell that I used over our house... to protect you, my son... It's the same spell, we deciphered from the Watchgate's core... from the Watchgate's core...*

*From the Watchgate's core... That's it!*

"Ginny, repeat after me. With every bit of concentration in you, just chant with me!" Harry looked at her fiercely, trying to make her understand how important this was.

She grasped his hand, assuring him that she would.

“Let those who rest more deeply sleep,” Harry began as Ginny repeated after him. “Let those awake their vigils keep.”

*“Let those who rest more deeply sleep... Let those awake their vigils keep...”* They chanted together.

“What are you two doing?” Voldemort demanded, the first hiss of alarm streaking his voice. He commanded the snake to sting them, but the snake shook its head, recoiling.

Louder still, Harry and Ginny chanted so that their voices mingled into one.

*“Let those who rest more deeply sleep,  
Let those awake their vigils keep...”*

They kept on chanting to Voldemort’s dismay, and as soon as he raised his own wand to silence them, an inhuman shriek rang the air. All around them the creatures’ profiles were lightening.

“You are freeing us?” Marak came closer to them, the ice-blue fire of his eyes diminishing.

Harry nodded his head, still chanting the spell with Ginny. He had understood that even if the watchers of the temple weren’t imprisoned, they were charmed to be sheltered in the Watchgate for perhaps eternity. In freeing them, Voldemort would be left alone.

Harry knew he wasn’t exactly ready for dueling Voldemort yet. But, would he ever be? Sybil Trelawney only prophesized that he had to finish Voldemort off or die trying. Even if death wasn’t what Harry desired, it was much better than the life he was currently leading. At least he would meet his parents, his godfather. Have a complete family, finally...

*Still, would it be worth it?* If he had some innate power—a trickle of which he already had experienced this year—would it help in obliterating Voldemort from the wizarding community once and for all? Wouldn’t *that* be something?

What he needed right now, was to understand what kind of debt the Watchers meant when they whispered the riddle to Ginny.

As his mind raced for an answer, the creatures around them lightened and dithered out of sight, the brilliant light of the central basin pulsed with every last screech, roar, howl and snarl. Slowly, but quite clearly, the four scrolls started coming together, while the basin-light pulsed more brilliantly.

"Well, you cleared my path, Harry. I will be eternally grateful." Voldemort stepped towards the basin.

"You can't have it!" Harry yelled with all his might.

"Oh, really?"

"You'll have to go through *me*," Harry snapped, while drawing his wand in the dueling stance.

"I am not going to repeat my last mistake—"

"*Incendio!*" Harry incanted, before Voldemort could complete his sentence.

"If you wish." Voldemort flicked out his wand, dodging the spell.  
"*Avada Kedavra!*"

"Nooooo!" Ginny cried at the top of her voice, as Harry ducked from the spell.

Everything was blinded by the shooting green light, and he was thrown to one side with the ground trembling beneath him. However, as he got his bearing back and opened his eyes, they widened with surprise.

One of the guardian panthers had come in between the spell and Harry. One of its stone paw had severed, still it stood on the rest three legs, glowering at Voldemort.

"Did *you* do this?" Harry asked Ginny.

"I only called for help... Not even said it out aloud..."

"It worked. That's all it matters." Harry spun towards Voldemort. "*Reducto!*" He shot without waiting for another moment.

Voldemort blocked with a green wisp in front of him. "Why don't you do something above your O.W.Ls, boy!" He shot a violet beam at him.

"*Protego!*"

"*Avada Kedavra!*"

Again the panther bounded in between, and blocked the spell. This time, however, it crumbled to the ground in a heap.

"Three more to go!" Voldemort said manically. "Why don't we do them some good, and finish them all together?"

Before Harry could do anything, Voldemort shot a spell at the nearest immobile guardian. Bright red sparks appeared on its body as it burst, spraying them with rubble. A red crack flowed towards the second guardian, and it burst too.

Grasping Ginny's hand, Harry stepped forwards, nearer to the central basin. Voldemort however was on a vantage point and could easily reach the basin before any of them would.

"We won't let you have it! My grandmother didn't make it to fulfill your vile purposes!" Ginny said bravely.

"She was a gullible witch. Just like you!" Voldemort retorted spitefully.

Harry stepped backward, seizing along Ginny. From the corner of his eye, he had seen the last guardian leave its position. Perhaps, it had been provoked by Voldemort's words against Ursula.

"Harry, what—"

Just as Voldemort raised his wand at Ginny, the guardian breathed magical fire at Voldemort of such intensity that Harry could have sworn, its range was more than a Hungarian Horntail's.

Voldemort's piercing shriek rang the chamber as he collapsed backwards, while the stone panther burst into smithereens like the others.

Harry was hit rather badly by few of the stones that came their way. Still, he recognized an opportunity when he saw one. The Vita Scroll was almost ready as the last crease fused with a glint and continuous pulsing light.

"This is our chance, Ginny. Go on. Get the Scroll!"

Ginny, ran towards the basin, Harry following suit. In a rush to touch the scroll however, she didn't see a smoking hand, raising a wand.

"No, you can't do this!" Harry yelled—registering Voldemort's intentions—getting ahead of Ginny.

*"Aveda Kedavra!"* Voldemort's voice croaked.

What happened afterwards seemed to take forever to unfold. Everything slowed down as a lot of things happened simultaneously.

The spell hit Harry square in the chest, and he fell to the floor, his wand shooting out of his hands. In the process of getting ahead of Ginny however, he had touched a part of the scroll as well, which seemed to be the exact time the scroll came in contact with Ginny.

The magnificent light pulsed in the basin and sent a wave through her body. She keeled over beside Harry, who was lying face down. Such an electrifying wave of energy passed through her body that she couldn't even move to reach Harry's limp body that hit the floor along her.

Her eyes rolled up into her head as a power she could only faintly recognize, filled her body; bone to bone, vein to vein, muscle to muscle, and cell to cell. She wanted to open her eyes and see Voldemort's progress, to howl over Harry's pain, to pray that he hadn't died...

*Oh please no... please... Oh please... noooooo!*

When she was finally able to open her eyes, the first thing that she noticed was the trembling ground beneath her; however, this time it didn't stop after awhile, but continued persistently. She saw the orange globe—Dumbledore's gift to Harry—which must have fluttered out of Harry's robe. She grasped it, and also pocketed his wand. She didn't check Harry's pulse, out of fright or confirmation.

At last, she turned to see Voldemort, who was on his knee, his robe still smoldering, issuing smoke. Her heart turned in her chest, as she looked at the central basin from where the Vita Scroll was gone; only a dull light came off it now.

"You evil pile of muck! You—YOU—" Ginny stopped herself before saying 'killed', as she stood up shakily.

Voldemort seemed to be gathering his bearings, while rocks and rubble showered all around them, and the columns supporting the temple groaned beneath an unknown pressure.

Just as she had felt a wave of energy when she had learned to use the Aqua Scroll, something similar covered her completely, as her anger built to a full flowing rage against Voldemort.

*He destroyed the scroll! What was the use of coming here, then? I lost Harry... Harry's lying on the floor... He's not breathing...*

The realization finally hit Ginny, and she screamed so loud that it reverberated in the expansive temple as a ghost calling. The destruction of the temple augmented, as if invoked by her tearful voice.

Voldemort pointed his wand at her, his lips, unmoving.

Still, she didn't feel any foreboding. It was as if she didn't want to be alive anymore. She didn't want to be the heir anymore, either. *There, I said it. I don't want the bloody scroll! I would've been better off if I hadn't come here!*

"Give me the scroll, girl!" Voldemort's hood was off, and his bald head still smoked.



“I don’t have it!”

“*Liar!* You were touching it. You have it, so give me the scroll, or I will kill you too!” His face looked grotesque than ever, as he looked wildly at her.

“Why don’t you then, *Voldemort!*” she mocked. “You’re nothing but a pathetic wanker. Your teenage-self was as greedy as you! I wish you would just DIE!” An angry sob escaped her. And, without even realizing what she was doing, she hovered an inch off the floor.

Before Voldemort could curse her, an energy beam shot out of the hand she had been pointing towards him—while grasping the orb with the other. A sizable hole appeared on the fabric of Voldemort’s robe, as his own widening eyes followed the progress of the energy beam.

His livid eyes dilated with shock as he stared at her calculatingly. At that exact moment, the spectacular glass dome burst in, showering them with pointed bits of glass. A huge marble piece, which seemed to have been the part of the roof-design smashed to the floor in front of Voldemort, blocking him from view.

Ginny, along shock, realized what she had been doing, and toppled to the floor, surprised.

*What’s—*

“Run, child! You don’t have much time!” A specter of a woman had appeared above the central basin. Looking closely, Ginny recognized her as Ursula Weasley.

She opened her mouth to speak, when she was again brandished.

“GO! There’s not much time.”

“But, I—” The weight of the orb suddenly became heavier in her hand, as if it was trying to remind her of its existence.

“*Use it when there’s no way out,*” Ginny repeated and kneeled beside Harry. “I hope I’m doing this right, Harry.” She wanted him to answer her, but he remained still.

More rubble fell all around her, while the ground shook beneath her more violently. She grabbed Harry with her left hand, while leaning over him she pressed the orb tightly in her right hand. "Help us! Please, help us!"

With a distant roar of, "*You've done enough! Be gone, you worthless refuse!*" Ginny lurched into an orange inferno, which revolved around her without harm. She could guess that the departing words of Ursula weren't for her but Voldemort.

*I hope the temple buried him!* She closed her eyes, leaning heavily on Harry, whose body shook along her—still clutching the orb. The journey reminded her of the travel to Caeli. The tumultuous wind was almost the same except for the orange light.

In another heartbeat she was falling headlong towards some destination.

*I'm going to crash. Harry's going to be hurt—don't think that he won't be hurt, Ginny!—Please, let him live. Let him be alive! Let him live! PLEASE!*

With a phoenix song ringing in her ear, she toppled to a solid floor.

"GINNY!"

"HARRY!"

The familiar shouts made her open her eyes. *Don't let it be a dream*, she thought, as the orb in her hand vanished in a wisp of smoke

"Ginny!"

Ron stood her up and hugged her close. She opened her eyes in the crook of his collar, tears streaming down her face. With a blurred vision, she saw Hermione clutch her sleeve, staring at the unmoving mass of Harry's body.

"Harry!" A strangled murmur escaped Dumbledore.

“This can’t be!” Remus Lupin kneeled beside him, and shifted him on his back.

What they all saw made them gasp even louder. Harry’s forehead was bloodied as if bludgeoned; his spectacles were cracked; eyes, unmoving; his skin, becoming paler by the second.

“I have failed you, my boy...” Dumbledore took off his half-moon spectacles, and rubbed his eyes, while Professor McGonagall, Hermione and Ginny all started crying quite loudly.

“You’re joking! Tell me you’re joking, Professor! Harry can’t *die*...” A single tear escaped Ron’s eye as he clutched the shaking bodies of Ginny and Hermione quite fiercely.

*He’s the bloody Boy-Who-Lived for Merlin’s sake, isn’t he? How can he just... die?*

**-x-X-x-**

## Chapter 33 – Reunion of Friends

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*Violet... Indigo... Blue... Green... Yellow... Orange... Red... White...*

*Beautiful pulsing lights... How wonderful...*

Was he swimming?

He heard a cackle of an infant.

Suddenly a face burst—with the essence of unconditional love—in front of him; his mother's face.

"Yes, yes! Mummy loves you so much!" She cooed, kissing his hands with affection.

With a swirl of green, her face dissolved, and a new one appeared in its place, which resembled him so, that it felt as though he was looking at his own reflection in a mirror.

"*This* is a toy broomstick, Harry. You'd love riding one of these." Harry made to grab the broomstick. "That's my boy!" James Potter flung him in the air and caught him, his hazel eyes glinting with pride.

The scene dissolved to a particularly loathsome, familiar face. "*Avada Kedavra!*"

Greenish light blinded his view, and with a searing pain in his scar. The pain receded somewhat as he heard his godfather's voice, "Everything'll be all right, Harry." He heard the rumble of a giant motorcycle, and had the sensation of a liftoff.

Before he could even enjoy the ride, his next eleven years rushed past his eyes in a haze of torment.

"You didn't clean the mess, Harry..." Dudley's guffaw followed him, as the fallen leaves he had collected to be trashed in the backyard of number four, Privet Drive, were strewn everywhere by his bullying cousin.

A single falling leaf magnified in front of his view, and the scene dissolved again to be fully taken up by Hagrid, who had rescued him from his Muggle relatives.

“Harry—yer a wizard!”

Hagrid’s voice boomed in his ears as he entered the Platform Nine and Three-Quarters for the first time.

Ron and Hermione, followed.

“I’m the sixth in our family to go to Hogwarts...”

“I’ve learnt all our set books off by heart, of course...”

In a blowing horn and sudden lights, all his Hogwarts friends came in view as if pushing each other to be let in first.

Neville... Dean... Seamus... Luna... All his Quidditch teammates...

There was so much noise that he wanted to tune everyone out, but couldn’t.

*Leave me alone! Please... leave me alone...*

A greenish light swathed him again. This time, it was searing than even pain. His head seemed to split into two, he even heard a crack as he balled into a fetal position.

*No, I can’t take this anymore...*

As if induced by his voice, everything around him went dark—even the blinding greenish light receded—as he experienced a wonderful sensation of weightlessness. Silence... sweet, pleasurable silence, filled his heart... And no sound came... Not even of his heartbeat...

*Am I dead?*

He opened his eyes and saw nothing except darkness.

“No, you are not dead...” a female voice answered, as a single ray of white light touched his face. “You have more than repaid my debt,

child. You have liberated my powers, so that it lives in you and my heir. You are truly a savior, Harry Potter.”

Before the words even sunk in, the single ray gave forth to more, so that Harry felt being aimed at by a huge searchlight. Closing his eyes, he felt the same weightlessness as if soaring towards some place.

Suddenly, the pain hit him again. He tried to open his eyes, but could only, barely. Every bone and muscle in his body was screaming with pain. Lamenting sounds hummed in his ears, as if his mind and body were mourning their own ache. He tried to make sense of everything. *I couldn't have walked into my own funeral, right?*

Ginny abruptly stopped crying as she felt an unknown force. Hermione still had her face buried in Ron's chest, as he continued to awkwardly pat both of them. Ginny moved away from him, while he looked questioningly at her.

Dumbledore, who had been hunched over his silver instruments sharply turned around and looked at Harry, along her. Lupin was still clutching Harry's hand, and had his eyes closed, pinching the bridge of his nose quite painfully.

*“Harry!”* Dumbledore was near him in a flick. *“He's alive!”*

Everyone suddenly crowded around, and hunched over him to make sure.

Dumbledore announced to the room in triumph, “Harry Potter lives!”

Harry could only hear a lot of choking and strangled cries before he finally passed out, knowing fully well that he was alive. He was back with his friends, and that's what mattered to him most of all.

**-X-**

Harry could barely see, but he already knew where he was. Now, even his bleary eyes were familiar with his special ward at the Hospital Wing. He easily made out that it was early morning; the golden sun was trying its best to infiltrate the curtains of his ward.

He groped for his spectacles at the bedside table. Finding it, he put them on, and was quite amused at what he saw next.

Ron was fast asleep with his usual snores on the bed beside his, while Hermione was lolling on what seemed to be a wide chintz chair, which suspiciously appeared to be conjured by Dumbledore.

He was just about to sit up, when the sounds of footfalls made him stop.

“Oh, not *again!*” Madam Pomfrey came tutting towards his friends, not noticing him awake.

“Everyday I try and they still sneak after midnight! As if I don’t have enough with Ginny Weasley hovering about all day!”

Hermione woke up with the Matron’s voice, and stopped in mid-yawn, goggling at Harry. Ron had already been prodded on the leg by Madam Pomfrey, who had awakened, issuing a huge yawn.

“Any chaaange, ‘ermione?”

Letting out an excited squeal, Hermione finally got over her shock and jumped at Harry, giving him her longest hug, along with bursting in tears. What Harry could see over her extremely bushy hair—which seemed bushier in the morning—Ron jumped off the bed and hobbled towards him in an instant.

“Harry, you’re awake!” he managed in a choked voice, as if not believing his eyes.

“Yeah, I’m awake, what’s the big deal?” Harry tried to sit up, which finally caused Hermione to let go of him. He sat up and found that he didn’t feel much pain except for a dull throb in head.

Madam Pomfrey who had been keeping a respectable distance till now came sniffing towards him. “Back from another one of your adventures, Potter? If you keep this up, next time they might have to bring you in boxes...” She shuddered, and sniffed some more, while checking his pulse and vital signs.

"I'll send your breakfast." She turned to reprimand Ron and Hermione, but seeing their exultant expressions; she sniffed one last time and made her way silently out.

"Er... was I out for long?" Harry asked innocently.

"How about more than a month, mate?" said Ron.

"Thirty-four days to be exact," Hermione supplied.

"You're joking, right?"

"I would've laughed, don't you reckon, Harry?" Ron said warily.

Looking at them, he registered how tired they looked. Hermione had dark circles around her eyes and Ron's skin looked sallow. Their disposition made him remember another person he had been worried over. "Caradoc's OK, right?"

"Yes, Harry," Hermione smiled at him knowingly. *Always worried about others rather than himself*, she thought ruefully. "His wand was configured to work as a Portkey if anything ever happened to him. He selected to drop wherever Dumbledore was in, so he ended up here."

"He was transferred to St. Mungo's for some time. He's at Grimmauld Place right now. There's a Get Well card that he specially sent for you." Ron indicated towards the side-table.

Harry followed his gaze and saw the biggest bunch of flowers, candies, and cards squeezed over a make-shift table.

"Almost the whole school missed you, except for the Slytherin lot." Ron grimaced. "Malfoy tried to send you a Venomous Tentacula. 'Course Madam Pomfrey had a fit. She even docked points from Slytherin." He grinned at the memory.

Harry wanted to ask about Ginny, and Hermione as if reading his mind, said, "Ginny's all right. She was the one who used Dumbledore's Crisis-Portkey... She'd be here any minute."

"So, that's what it was... You know—?"



"We *know*," Ron sighed. "She told us everything that happened..."

As if just to make sure that he was actually there, Harry touched his ears; fortunately, they were back to their normal size again. He looked up and Hermione, who was looking furtively at Ron, while he shook his head.

"I don't have green streaks, do I?" Harry asked, looking at them curiously.

"No, Harry, but you have *something*, all right." Hermione took out a small mirror out of her robe and handed it to him.

As he looked back at his own face, his own surprised eyes traveled the length of his now extended scar.

"According to Dumbledore, your scar has matured, Harry," Hermione provided.

The scar that had been confined to his forehead before, now had traced the similar lightning-bolt path right along the corner of his right eye, ending at the tip of his right ear. "Er... Is this because of the Killing Curse?"

"That and more, Harry," said a very choked voice of Ginny. She came towards him, as his heart lurched in his chest.

"We'll see you in a bit, Harry." Hermione positively dragged Ron outside to leave them alone. He distinctly heard her say, "They faced so much together, they need to sort thing out!"

Ginny stopped at the foot of his bed, while Ron and Hermione left the room. She simply looked at him, as her eyes welled with tears.

Harry didn't want her to cry. "I'm fine... you shouldn't cry..." A funny feeling settled in his stomach as he extended his hand to grab hers. Like a weightless doll, Harry pulled Ginny nearer until she was standing over him.

His grip tightened as he looked in her eyes. He knew that instant, why he had done the things he did. He loved this girl. This thought hit him

with the force of a Bludger's blow, as his heart suddenly beat silly for her.

As if reading something in his eyes, Ginny came close and hugged him, while sitting beside him on the bed. Harry's arms went around her automatically as he held her close, savoring the pleasant feelings that this simple act roused in his body. A sense of contentment filled his heart as he breathed in her hair, while she fit perfectly in the crook of his neck.

He stroked her hair, as her sobs subsided so that she raised her head and looked at him. "You're such a prat!"

Harry was slightly taken aback by her pronouncement. "*That* was uncalled for..."

"Oh yeah? You should be hanged in Filch's lovable chains for what you did. Risking your life like that!" Ginny poked at his chest.

"Ginny, c'mon I couldn't've let Voldemort get the scroll, and..." *I did it for you...*

"That's beside the point, Harry! We thought... you *died*..." she whispered the last words so inaudibly that Harry had to lip-read.

"I thought so too..." Noticing her furious look, he changed tracks, "I mean... that was what my mind thought up in short notice... Until Ursula told me that I had repaid her debt... Maybe that's why I'm still alive."

"We were so worried..." Ginny sighed.

"That's why Ron and Hermione guarded me every night, while you did the day-shift?" Harry asked, amused, while a grin played across his face. His right hand extended to play with a stray lock of her hair that had fallen beside her right cheek.

Ginny blushed. "Well..."

"You got the scroll, didn't you Ginny?" Harry asked huskily, as the distant between their faces diminished with every uttered word.

“We both did, Harry.” Ginny lowered her eyelids.

*This is the right time...* Harry leaned forwards as his heart boomed in his chest. Ginny didn’t resist, as she too leaned in as his mouth closed on hers. An energy flew between them, making their kiss even more tantalizing. Harry experienced such bliss that he didn’t know existed.

As they finally parted for breath, a wave passed between them, which Harry deemed to their shared scroll energy.

Ginny interlaced her fingers with his, and asked, “D’you think he died in the temple?”

“No.” Harry shook his head firmly. “I still feel him.”

Their *bliss* was interrupted by the sound of the Matron’s steps. After which, Ginny had excused herself in a hurry, blushing furiously. It had been her coloring, or the dazed expression plastered on his face, that told Madam Pomfrey all.

She cleared her throat quite loudly, and bustled out of the room after setting his breakfast tray. He didn’t even get around asking her, when he would be set free from observation.

After finishing his breakfast in a happy stupor, he finally got around Caradoc’s card.

*Dear Harry,*

*You have shown greater strength than I have ever imagined. People rightly revere you, Harry, because you not only possess a brave soul but a very big heart.*

*You have proved that fate can be changed. You see, I was told that the heir would die, and the scroll would fuse with a bearer—who exactly, the Mages didn’t know. Therefore, the fear of Voldemort winning, and the worlds getting doomed were so prominent in their prediction. I think, what the Ulterian Mages couldn’t predict was the compassion in you. You not only saved my life, but Ginny’s as well,*

*and faced up to Voldemort, yet again—not once fearing for your own life. I can easily see now why people call you his downfall.*

*You will always have my deepest gratitude, Harry. I thought I saw the last of the world I was abducted from. Now, I'm alive and healthy to explore this world that I missed so much, only because of you.*

*You rightly deserve the vita powers, Harry. You've earned it!*

*Hoping, that you'll come back to health, and get well soon.*

*Sincerely,*

*- Caradoc Dearborn*

Harry put down the card thoughtfully.

*So, I have new powers, now?* He mused, flexing his hands, trying to sense any change in his body. As soon as he closed his eyes for more concentration, he felt an energy shoot to his flexed hand. The hair on the nape of his neck stood on end as he felt a jolt go through his entire body. He felt a new force, just beside his heart; it was as if he had an energy ball of his own.

“So, you’ve found the Novus Vita in you?” Dumbledore’s voice brought him back to the outer world, who was looking quite thoughtfully at him. “Do you feel the change of the new vita?”

Harry smiled at Dumbledore as he seated himself on the wide chintz chair. There was something about Dumbledore that always calmed him down. “Yeah, I do...” As if realizing suddenly, he said, “I—I’m sorry, Professor... I promised that I wouldn’t do anything rash but—”

“—you did?” Dumbledore’s eyes twinkled behind his half-moon spectacles.

“Er...”

“You gave all of us a fright, yes. My guilt of sheltering you from the prophecy intensified, too. However, I have always been a strong

believer of wondrous things; even more strongly, I believed in your ability to stomach Voldemort's deviousness."

"I still don't understand how I got saved, Professor."

"You live, Harry, because you sacrificed your life for the greater good. It was Ursula who made the scroll, so the highly intelligent power of the scroll understood your intentions. As I understand from what Ginny had explained to me—both of you touched the scroll at the same time, and in normal circumstances that wouldn't have made much difference, the scroll would have fused with its rightful heir anyway. However, your selfless act made the scroll transfer its power to both of you, so that both of you shared it equally.

"Did you not think of the reason, why it took you more than a month to wake up? It was not because of the physical pain that you endured, alone; it was because of the transference of a part of the *vita* in you, as well. As I told you before, this scroll was hereditary—made to be transferred to the heir, who was bound with blood. You don't have any direct relation with Ursula, so the powers took a while to get used to every fiber of your body."

"My scar matured because of this *vita* in me?" Harry asked.

"Your scar matured because this time—as the first one—you were directly attacked, and then saved by an ancient magic. Part of your *vita* made the curse deflect, not letting the thread of your soul break from your body. It is fascinating how you evaded another Killing Curse, Harry.

"However, I'm afraid that it wouldn't be listed anywhere except for some confidential files of the Department of Mysteries. Your journey to Caeli can't be publicized at this sensitive time; it would cause more panic than the wizarding community's already in—"

"What about the people in Diagon Alley, then?" Harry still remembered the faces that pressed through many shops' windows.

"Their memories were modified, naturally. Except the Order, only few Ministry officials *remember* what really happened. With Caradoc's

return however, the Department of Mysteries is reopening their old project of journeying to different worlds.”

“Would Caradoc still want to Drift to other worlds, after spending so much time in Taita?” Harry asked, concerned.

“Oh, rest assured. He’s not planning to *go* anywhere. He will lead the project, teaching a selected batch of Unspeakables to be Drifters.”

Harry contemplated on the idea of being a Drifter. Discovering other worlds and their inhabitants seemed quite an interesting career indeed.

His mind drifted towards Ursula again. “Ursula... Well—a form of her anyway—told me that I’ve repaid her debt. Was it of the creatures of the Watchgate?” Harry told Dumbledore everything that had happened after he was hit by the Killing Curse.

“That and her own, Harry,” Dumbledore started thoughtfully, “We still don’t know that Ursula *actually* died or not. Molly told me a curious thing. Ursula hasn’t been seen in her family portrait since you returned from Caeli. And it isn’t even Halloween that her absence is justified. What I gather from all this is that you freed her soul from wherever she was trapped. Ginny told me that she saw her ghost in the temple, which I think in fact, was her soul. She has passed to the next stage of death, I believe...”

“Is death different for us—I mean, us wizards?”

“Somewhat, Harry. We live longer than Muggles for one—”

“We do?” Harry interrupted, amazed.

“Yes,” Dumbledore smiled at him. “I, myself, am pushing hundred and fifty this year.”

Harry’s eyes widened in shock, as he took in this particular information; he knew Dumbledore was old, but *that* old?

Harry, then, went on and told Dumbledore about the short while he got to see his mother.

“Fascinating indeed.” Dumbledore looked at him delicately. “If the events hadn’t unfolded the way it did, you wouldn’t have been with us, Harry. You see, everything has a price. To acquire such exquisite magic, you needed a pure heart as well—”

“Then, how Voldemort could’ve used it?”

“Voldemort, for one, is a very clever wizard. Not forthcoming, but very clever. He could have acquired the scroll by force. Obviously, the scroll wouldn’t have fused with him, but even in physical form of a scroll, Vita Scroll could have been used to execute a lot of horrible things.

“However, your strength and courage failed Voldemort, yet again. The embedded powers of the scroll fought back the Killing Curse, rejuvenating your soul. Your selfless act saved a lot of lives, Harry.” He beamed at him.

“Professor...” he hesitated, thinking it would be questions, too many. Looking at Dumbledore’s good-humored expression however, he ploughed on, “Do you know about these powers?”

“They have come from four basic elements. I daresay, you have two of these elements—which ones exactly, you’ll find out with practice. To yield this power, Harry, you don’t need your wand, because of which I need you to promise me, not to use it unless you really *need* to. I have enough confidence in you to say that you won’t be misusing it.”

“I promise, Professor, I wouldn’t do anything stupid.”

The smile twitching Dumbledore’s beard told him, that he was humoring him.

Another prospect opened to Harry as he imagined chasing his cousin over a cloud of air, while Dudley—screaming mad—blundered through Wisteria Walk. He smiled at the thought. Oh well, thinking wasn’t a crime; of course, he wouldn’t do such a stupid thing... That reminded him.

“What happened to Michael and Colin, Professor?” he asked quizzically.

“That’s a sad tale indeed. Like many wizards before him, Michael Corner, too, faced the Imperius Curse, and was muddled away from the right path. The only adult witch that died in Platform Nine and Three-Quarters incident was Michael’s eldest sister. Her death was used as a catalyst by Voldemort in order to pacify his actions.”

“I knew he was being controlled! Was Colin, too?”

“In a way. You have to believe that Michael had been totally under Voldemort’s power, when he used an advanced Befuddlement Draught on Colin. He also bewitched him, not to let anybody in on the secret. When you caught him red-handed in your room, he went to an eternal sleep.”—Harry’s stared on, shocked—“He had been revived with the help of Professor Vidal and your friends. As the spell wore off and his mind cleared, Michael was very sorry indeed, along with Mr. Creevey, who couldn’t believe he had tried to harm you, of all people.”

Harry felt a twinge of sympathy for them, even if they had made his life quite awful this year. Michael wasn’t bad, and Colin was sometimes annoying but never vindictive. “Does anybody know what they did, Professor?”

“No, Harry, except their Head of Houses no one knows.”—Harry breathed a sigh of relief for them—“Ravenclaw faced quite a setback this year with two of its students going haywire.”

“Two?” Seeing the meaningful expression on his face, Harry understood. “Hermione told you about Cho’s potion work?”

Dumbledore nodded and continued, his expressions softening, “Do you know, Harry, you’re lucky to have such friends who are ready to sacrifice even their lives for you. Ron for one had been rather disgruntled that he didn’t get to do it this year.” Dumbledore’s beard twitched. “However, he got some thrill in taking on our Potions Master.” His eyes glinted even more, while Harry grinned. “I’m sure Ron would want to tell you the details himself. Furthermore, as



Minerva has pointed out to me, I must alert you of the upcoming final exams. Seems like you have a lot of catching up to do.”

Harry’s head seemed to positively buzz with the answers he had been looking for, as they sidled in their right places along each puzzle-piece that he had collected. *But, final exams!* He didn’t have any place for final exams!

Looking at his worried expression, he added, “I’m amazed that Miss Granger hasn’t terrorized you with exam preparations yet? She’ll get you prepared in no time.”

Dumbledore departed with a gentle pat on his head, leaving behind a very apprehensive Harry.

-x-X-x-

***Woot! Not a cliffy? How’s that possible? (I see you wondering)... I’m going soft... Oh NO! -cackles-***

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**Now, some more plot details and canon clues:**

- You must have seen the **Adult art cover of HBP?** Which is an Advanced Potions books, meaning two things. Either Harry will take NEWTs Potions as I predicted, or brew some advanced potion himself. The US art cover has Harry and Dumbledore looking at a basin, it can contain a potion. We’ll, find out soon enough!

**Cho was not working with Michael Corner.** I know many of you want her to be punished, but as it’s her last year, Dumbledore didn’t do much except for repeating her escapades to Professor Flitwick (Ravenclaw’s Head of House), who in turn gave her a month’s detention. I take much joy and pleasure in informing you that the month turned out to be the one before her N.E.W.Ts, so she did get what she deserved.

- **Michael was working alone at first**, but then when he saw that Harry kept on slipping his schemes, and he looked for reinforcements, which he unwittingly found in **Colin**. He used an advanced

*befuddlement draught, using Scurvy-grass, lovage and sneezwort, (a clue from OoTP).*

**- Michael had been under Voldemort's complete control.** *If you go back to his musings, you'll find that he was afraid to go back home in Christmas because of the new responsibilities that he had gotten himself into. He's not a real baddie even.*

**- Voldemort at first wanted Harry killed** *(in case of the Platform Nine and Three-Quarters' portal) incident. However, he knew that Harry was developing a close bond with his mother (when Harry's vision mingled with Voldemort's). So, he planned to get him to Caeli and actually do the work for him, in case of the Aqua Scroll. He didn't know that Ursula had a heir, because there are so many Weasleys, so that came as a surprise for him. Still, didn't do any good anyway, except for smoldering like hell! -laughs-*

**- Lily and Harry's special connection:** *Well, mothers always have a special connection with their children anyway. In case of Lily, she left more than a mark on her son, when she sacrificed herself for him. I know JKR's going to explain this more, but I only tweaked this a little with their same eyes, and made them connect even more.*

**- Faster than a Firebolt!** *Oh yeah, I know last chapter's pace was very fast, and I changed POVs as well. But, I do like to experiment a lot. Being a girl, it's easier to write in Ginny's or Hermione's POV but I like to shift the paradigm, like I did with Neville.*

**- So when is this fic ending?** *Looks like Green Eyes have got me there. Would I want to write this on and on, as Staci mentioned too? I would surely like to, but then again, as I promised myself, I WILL finish this one before HBP, so I WILL! Come hail or storm or rain.*

**- Why another chapter?** *Well, that's easy, there's a huge time gap between end of March and June. Even if I had done my best, I had to do a huge leap over time, which I did in a way with these last two chapters. But, hey, I hope you're happy that there's another chapter to read.*

**- When will the Epilogue be posted:** *After the HBP frenzy, I'm afraid. So, you'll get the last update at the end of July or maybe first*

week of August by maximum. If you don't have an ff account, you can give me your email address, and I'll email you when I post the epilogue.

**- And yeah, I'm too soppy to make anyone die!** No one is dying, you hear (JKR)? -glares- Agh! I think I'm gonna cry again when I finish reading HBP. -sniffles-

**Now, coming to some answers:**

**Green Eyes,** Of course I, myself, don't want to stop writing this fic, but everything has an end, so alas, I will. However, I will not stop writing, and you're welcome to read my upcoming works, which are outlined in my Bio. About the Voldemort of CH 31, well, he came directly from GoF—which I'm currently re-reading—I guess the whole chattiness came from there. Thanks for all your compliments! I'm excited over HBP as you. (3 more days left!)

**Missy May,** HE WILL COME BACK! –chants along Missy- OH YES, he did! I hope you're happy now:D

**Akanksha,** It's so good to see you back here! How you've been? I hope you're enjoying your training in Pune. I haven't been to that city as well. I guess Mumbai, Delhi and Kolkatta were my thing. ;) I hope your Caradoc fears got quashed in this chapter. Everyone is all right and ALIVE! -smiles- You're right about Ron and Hermione, and you can see that Ron was quite vociferous with the fact that he didn't get to kick some butt except in case of the Shrieking Shack and Platform incident. Then again, they couldn't have gone to Caeli either, still they're as loyal as anybody I know! About Vanquishing Voldemort, that's the year-seven thing that can't happen in a year-six fic, so I've steered off that point. But, I agree, Ron and Hermione will be there with Harry when he finally finished Voldemort.

**Mahjabeen,** -laughs- Oh yes, I can't DARE! Or the wrath of Mahjabeen will fall on me. (Hehee!) I hope your questions were answered this update, and you're happy with the end as well, as it was not a cliffie. Enjoy!

**Imran1,** I hope your confusions were answered? Only if you asked what confused you, I would've answered your queries.

**Silver Phoenix Fire,** Thanks for all the compliments! Much appreciate it. You're right, that the bonding of wizards should've taken longer, but as I said above, I was under a lot of pressure to make everything go fast and still end CH 32 with Ginny and Harry safely back at Hogwarts. I hope all your answers got answered by my long rant and the current update.

**Yorkvillebird,** As always, thanks for liking the story!

**Thephantom114,** YYY for you. I hope you're happy that there's yet another chapter left? I read your last review, and asked, how did he know there are two chapters coming? You must've counted the Epilogue as well. Lucky you! You knew it even before the other readers. -winks- Enjoy reading!

**Macy,** Thanks, girl! Oh I know you were going to kill me if Harry would've died. I took that threat seriously. -nods- Heh! Now enjoy the rest of the fic!

**Omair,** Even if I wanted to kill you after your last update, you went and got ill. -fumes- What would I have said except, "Get Well, you prat!" Anyways, you can be happy now, there was no cliffy this update either. I will keep at it of course, who knows better than you? -winks-

**Heather,** The last time, I didn't answer you properly I think. You asked, why Harry's parents went to the temple in the first place. The whole thing ends with Vita Scroll. They came to see the temple, to see another world, also to see and confirm that the legend was true. Of course, Voldemort was after the scrolls as well, and so the whole thing climaxed with Chapter 32.

**R-Krulle,** Thanks for your compliments, and no killing Harry, yes! -nods-

**Staci,** All that stuff comes right from the weird place that keeps on buzzing somewhere inside my mind. -winks- Thanks for showering so much love for the fic. The fic itself gives you a very sugary hug. – huggles!- I'm glad that your imagination got worked up with the imagination, just as I intended! I actually want my readers see what

*I've cooked up. -winks- I think, once I finish this fic, I'm gonna scream myself hoarse! Thanks for sticking around!*

**Miss Granger,** *Thanks for liking the updates! About Voldemort's snake, it was no Nagini that he had full control over her. However the snake didn't obey Voldemort because Harry said, 'Please,' and also knew Parseltongue. You would be surprised if you know a foreign language and speak nicely to them, they'll go over each other to please you. I used that rule with the snake. Hope, you like the upcoming end.*

**Draco's Wife Lover,** *The update is here to quench your thirst. And on a side note, I loved Finding Nemo! I think you were watching the 'Crush' part? ('Mr. Turtle was my father! I'm Crush.') I'm a freak when it comes to animated movies, because I mostly love 'em all! Enjoy the update!*

**Koki,** *You'll be there in no time, and would be ready to kill me too. -winks- Still, I think you'll be happy after this chapter. Cheers for your catching up!*

**MachiavellianOrange,** *Oh yeah! I'm picturing Draco with spiky hair as Arnold, right now. ;) I think we've met in LJ at TGB, right? Thanks for your appreciation. I'm delighted that you like the plot and characterization, and I hope the end doesn't disappoint you, as it's not of your favorite ship.*

**BumpyRider,** *Thanks! I hope you like the end!*

**MoA,** *Hey, I want my readers happy and with grins, not pouts. -winks- Let me help you in getting off that pout with this chapter, eh? And yes, what a deadline it has been! But, it's all been very much worth it!*

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To Harry's relief, he was discharged the next day, by which time he had been filled in on the events of the past month by Ron, Hermione, Ginny and Luna. Except for Luna, the other two didn't know about his and Ginny's new development, but Harry surmised that it couldn't be kept quiet for long.

Hagrid, Lupin, and Caradoc, also came to visit him as soon as they heard that he had awakened. Hagrid had come first, and given him such a long hug that once he let go, he had to cough in order to regain normal breathing. Hagrid had beamed at him nonstop and had kept on poking him about any new developments with the *Red Queen* (Ginny's nickname made popular by Dean Thomas), Harry shied away from commenting. Moreover, Lupin and Caradoc had come together, and Harry was happy to observe their renewed friendship. Lupin had been filled in by Caradoc; still, he was very fascinated by the account of the guardians, and the snatches of his parents that he had seen after getting hit with the Killing Curse.

"Your mind is opening to your past, Harry," Lupin had pronounced wisely.

Harry also noticed—happily however—that Ron had finally started calling Voldemort by his name, as he continued mentioning rude things that should be done to him.

"I see you calling by his name, Ron," Harry had said appreciatively.

"Loads of good that'll do!" Ron had rolled his eyes, but couldn't help beaming at Harry for noticing, nonetheless.

Harry also found out—not so happily, this instance—that the time he had spent in Caeli had only amounted to a day at Hogwarts. His disappearance was only registered the next day when he hadn't showed up in his dormitory room. Neville had been sworn in by that time, so Ron informed Dean and Seamus that Harry had caught something while visiting his Muggle Aunt, and would be gone for

some time. Of course, many curious students had tried to get a glimpse of him at the infirmary, but Madam Pomfrey had barricaded his ward so fiercely that it was only broken into by Hermione—every night, that is.

No Death Eater activity was reported by the Daily Prophet either, which only meant that either Voldemort was simmering over his defeat, or this was another silence before the upcoming storm—both of which weren't very appealing.

When Harry entered the Great Hall one bright morning of May, majority of the heads swiveled towards him—others, who weren't looking, were painfully poked to do so—and fixed their sight on his now extended scar. Before, his unruly hair had helped in hiding it, but now unless he planned on growing them to shoulder-length as Sirius's, his hair wouldn't be of any help in the hiding department.

"Hiya, Harry!" Neville shouted over the din, that was buzzing the Great Hall.

Even the Gryffindors gaped at his scar, and Harry couldn't blame them. He, himself, hadn't been used to it till now. He noticed Lavender and Parvati, who seemed positively enraptured by his scar—Harry's bet was over a new harebrained prediction by his Divination professor, Sybil Trelawney. And Colin Creevey for one, seemed to be having a horrible heart attack, as he trembled, looking at him.

Harry wanted to console him but he was afraid that he might go into shock if he tried to talk to him, so he sidled to a seat quite far and hidden from Colin.

"What happened, Harry?" Dean asked concerned as he sat between Ron and Hermione, both of whom tried to imitate Crabbe and Goyle's trollish features so that people would look some other place—however, to no avail.

"Er..."

"I heard some Slytherins talking, that you went to some other dimension, and only returned because you begged to be let out?"

"I heard you were bit by a werewolf, Harry..." Seamus cut in, staring feverishly at his scar as if to make out a werewolf bite.

"*Honestly*, you two," Hermione puffed in indignation. "How can you believe such crackpot stories?"

"I *didn't*," Dean added hastily, while Seamus nodded along. However, they did exchange curious looks when they thought he wasn't looking.

"He got injured in a fight with his cousin," Ron supplied on an impulse. "Very *disturbed*, that one." He shook his head in disdain for effect.

"Yeah... It took time to heal," Harry cottoned on, while Ron and Hermione nodded their heads vigorously.

Nobody related his reappearance with the Gryffindor House Points increasing to Nine hundred and seventy-three from six hundred and seventy-three. Professor McGonagall told Hermione that it was awarded on Harry's special services to the school—which again, wasn't made known. Ravenclaw's points were the lowest in many years, as Professor Flitwick took three hundred points from his own House in disgust.

Harry was flashed with a lot of suspicious looks throughout the month, as he went from class to class. Everyone had to either accept his story, or believe in the rumors supplied by the Slytherins. Comprehending their zero reliability, many wild theories were tossed around, but as the final exams approached most of them got so busy with studies that thankfully the finger-pointing at his scar finally stopped.

He breathed a sigh of relief, as he was already having difficulty in memorizing and practicing the lessons that he had missed. He truly appreciated Hermione as a friend, who along with her Prefect duties spent the rest of her free time teaching him. Ron—who had been too worried about Harry that he hadn't paid much attention in lessons—seized this opportunity as well.

One plus that came from all of this, Malfoy didn't bother them anymore. If their paths even crossed in the corridors—which was often as they were in same year—he and his cronies about-turned



and vanished; he also started sitting as far away from Harry as possible, in the lessons that they had together. According to Ron, “Malfoy’s been thriving on rumors since you turned him into a Flobberworm. Maybe he’s just scared that you’ll turn him into a Bundimun next!” Harry had another theory of his own. Lucius Malfoy must have informed him about what had happened in Caeli, at least a mild version of it—causing his panic.

During his catching up, all of the professors cooperated with him, except for one Severus Snape, who gave him such a long essay to write over ‘One Thousand Uses of Scurvy-grass, Lovage and Sneezewort’, that he was near to collapse when he reached the nine hundredth. Hermione helped him with the last hundred uses.

And, Ginny had more workload than any of them because of her upcoming O.W.Ls. She confined herself into a corner of the common room and studied till midnight everyday, which was quite appropriate, because whenever it was Ron and Hermione’s turn of patrol duty, they got to spend some quality time together. Harry discovered another fact; a little necking went a long way on relieving exam tension.

In between this preparation frenzy, he was finally cornered by Michael Corner one day, along a very shivery Colin. He had been on his way to the common room, laden with reference books, when he was almost flagged to stop by them.

“Harry, a minute, please?” Michael requested.

“Yeah, sure.” Registering his embarrassed manner, Harry added, “You really don’t have to do this. Dumbledore told me how you were controlled. I don’t need any explanations, really.”

Michael’s eyes widened, while Colin’s lip trembled as if he was going to cry.

“I don’t blame you, too, Colin,” he tried to soothe his worries away. “I know how hard it is to lose someone close to you. Anyone could’ve been blinded...”

“I’m so sorry, Harry,” Colin said faintly.

"I hope you forgive my mistakes..." Michael looked uncertainly at Harry.

"What's to forgive?" Harry said earnestly. "You didn't do it on your own, Michael. You were provoked. Voldemort"—Both of them cringed, but Harry ignored them—"has a way with people. He always uses your weaknesses against you. I don't blame you—any of you."

Seeing them preparing to apologize again, Harry cut in with, "Now, I've got to run and finish a very long reading list... Bye!"

He left a very astounded Michael, and a reverent Colin behind.

As Harry rounded on the Gryffindor common room stairwell, he couldn't help feeling lighthearted as he jogged towards the portrait of the Fat Lady. The clouds of doom were parting for him, finally. His preparations for exams were going well—thanks to Hermione. And, he had already been informed by Lupin that he wouldn't have to spend much time at the Dursleys this summer, as he would be taught to Apparate, and properly channel his vita powers. That also meant that Ginny would be taking those classes as well.

Harry couldn't wait these exams to be over, and the vacations to start.

**-X-**

The final exams started with a group of mutinous clouds that sent torrents of rain, smattering every window, as if hammering to shatter it. Inside the Hogwarts castle, students milled about their common rooms, revising and finishing their last bit of reading. Some nervous faints were reported, either for too much studying, or not studying at all. The tempers were running high as many scuffles ensued in the corridors on trivial things like, talking too loudly, or not watching where they were going. As if the exam papers weren't surprising enough, the rain clouds kept on thundering and clapping when they least expected.

Like a pelting Firebolt, the dreaded exam week finished, leaving them rather empty. It seemed to Harry that whatever he had learned in the short duration of last month had seeped out of his ears, and now he was left with a hollow brain, feeling positively light. The chatter all

around him proved that everyone was relaxing after the grueling session of exams. Even the sun came out of the clouds and winked at them.

As always Hermione beamed with the knowledge that she would top all subjects—yet again. Ron wasn't sure that he would pass Potions this term—coming to that, Harry wasn't either.

As gloomily as the term had begun, it ended with a lot of cheering and merrymaking. Within a week, their results came out along the rest of the school, except for the fifth- and seventh-year students, who appeared for O.W.Ls and N.E.W.Ts respectively, and would get their results during the holidays directly from the Examination Office at Ministry of Magic.

Surprisingly, both Ron and Harry passed every subject with good grades, even Potions—for which Ron swore that Dumbledore must have had a hand in it. Not so surprisingly, Hermione topped every subject, and beamed at the pair of them for doing not so bad. For Harry, it was better than *you-could've-done-better* lecture.

Every House threw a rowdy party that day, which continued till midnight.

**-X-**

Harry couldn't believe another year was gone as he packed his trunk to be loaded into the Hogwarts Express the next day. The year that had started with such trauma and deaths was ending quite cheerfully. He hoped that the trend would continue.

He hurriedly bundled his side-table paraphernalia into his trunk, as he was already getting late for the end of the term Feast. A squealing Ginny however, interrupted his packing by entering his room.

"Harry, you won't believe what I saw!" She was suffering a very bad case of giggles.

"D'you think it's wise for you to come here?"

“Oh, grow up, Harry!” Ginny waved her hand, as she took out an old parchment from her robe.

“Ginny, not *again!*” Harry complained, as he recognized his Marauder’s Map.

“You weren’t using it, so I just *borrowed* it.” Ginny’s eyes were glinting mischievously.

Harry’s interest was piqued all right. “It better be good.”

“Oh, it is!” Ginny giggled some more, as she activated the map with, “I solemnly swear that I’m up to no good.” She handed the map to him. “See anything interesting on the second floor?”

Harry looked closely at that section of the map. “Well, house-elves sure look busy today... Hang on,” Harry’s eyes widened as he looked at the concealed passage near the kitchen that led directly to fourth floor.

Ginny giggled hysterically as she peered beside Harry, while he stared at two familiar dots squashed together. His face split into a grin, as he registered what his best friends were doing.

“They’ll snog each other senseless if they don’t stop,” Ginny chortled.

“About time!” Harry whooped.

“Finally!” Ginny exclaimed.

“Yeah...” Harry got an idea of his own as he looked at the seventh floor, and then wiped the map with, “mischief managed.”

“Er... Ginny, d’you know there’s nobody in the entire common room right now?”

“No...” Ginny’s giggle vanished, as she looked indulgently at the grin spreading on his face.

She gave a high squeal, and ran for the common room as Harry chased her, laughing his head off.

-X-

Both the couples dragged themselves to the feast after some time, making stupid excuses to either one of them. Hermione seemed to catch on to the changed standing of Harry and Ginny, but Ron didn't much care as he stared dreamily at Hermione throughout the dinner, much to her chagrin.

To no one's surprise, Gryffindor won the House Cup for the sixth year running; Professor McGonagall couldn't help beaming at a very displeased Snape, who took out his anger on the nearest pudding, quashing it into a pulp.

Harry had a very peaceful sleep that day, well fed and extremely happy. He felt contented, and dreamt of his parents, who waved at him pleasantly from some higher point.

-X-

On board the Hogwarts Express, after settling down, Harry finally announced to Ron, Hermione and Ginny, that he had something important to tell them. He finally seemed *ready* to do it.

Looking at his serious expression, Hermione soundproofed their compartment, while Ron sealed the door. Ginny didn't have to do anything special to Pig because he, too, became quite unusually still in his cage—it was because of Hedwig's stern eye or simply the seriousness of the situation, they didn't stop to contemplate.

As the tension that he had been feeling all year ebbed away from his body, Harry finally repeated Sybil Trelawney's prophecy to them:

*"The one with the power to vanquish the Dark Lord approaches... born to those who have thrice defied him, born as the seventh month dies... and the Dark Lord will mark him as his equal, but he will have the power the Dark Lord knows not... and either must die at the hand of the other for neither can live while the other survives... the one with the power to vanquish the Dark Lord will be born as the seventh month dies..."*

He told them everything that Dumbledore had informed him about the prophecy, including how Neville could have been marked, but Voldemort chose him for some reason.

It took almost half of their journey to finish it. After which, there was a stunned silence, as Ron goggled at him, Hermione chewed her lip, and Ginny kept wringing her hands. The silence was broken by a knock on the door.

“Blimey, Harry... You aren’t *joking*?” Ron tried to laugh, but didn’t, while Harry shook his head seriously.

Hermione opened the compartment door, and bought their supply of food from the trolley.

“I wanted to tell you... but *things* kept on happening...” said Harry.

“And I thought her to be a fraud...” Hermione said in a small voice, as she handed him his stack of pasties, cauldron cakes and chocolate frogs. “I’ve read about prophecies of course, did a bit of side reading while I was taking Divination—Ron! Would you stop making faces?—one thing that I understood is that they should be translated rightly, keeping in view every angle.”

“Yeah, that’s why Voldemort didn’t know that he shouldn’t have marked me. And now, he has repeated his mistake,” Harry added.

“This changes a lot of things, Harry. Now, everything makes sense; why he had been after you and all that... And, it’s not about him and you anymore... the whole wizarding community comes to light here... No wonder you’ve been feeling so much pressure.” Hermione shook her head, empathizing with him.

“I’m *fine*,” he looked at all of them, taking more time with Ginny. “I got plenty of time to deal with it. When Dumbledore told me last year, I was still in shock. It actually sank in at Grimmauld Place, after talking with Lupin...”

“I’m not saying it’s easy... But after what happened at Caeli, meeting my mother there. Seeing the love that my parents left behind inside of *me*, having such loyal friends... All of this has made me realize that if

I really want to do something, I *can* do it.” He looked significantly at Ginny, whose eyes went misty.

“We’ll be right beside you, Harry,” Hermione said decidedly, her voice hoarse.

“Course!” Ron looked at the group, as if it was already understood. “I still don’t believe it... I mean, you didn’t tell us for a whole year?” He looked hurt, while he brutally tore a chocolate frog wrapping.

“C’mon, Ron, didn’t Voldemort tried his best to do Harry in, all year? It’s not easy to tell someone that your death has already been predicted,” Ginny said sorely, as she had gone through the same thing this year with the Elders of Ulterius.

“Course, you’ll side with your scroll buddy!” Ron brandished a chocolate frog at her, and then looked at Harry—trying his best to lighten the mood. “Five long years, you build a strong friendship—and what you get?—he runs off with your little sister to some other world, forgetting his best mate in his adventures!”

Harry tried his best not laugh, even if the frog in Ron’s hand kept on lolling side to side, while its brown eyes popped, as he waved his hands about.

“Ron—”

“Don’t hush me, Hermione; we were getting worried sick over here—”

Ginny couldn’t help herself and burst out laughing. As if it was contagious, Harry and Hermione, started as well.

“*What?*” Ron asked, bewildered; his eyes glinting with mischief. In his gesturing about, he had severed the poor chocolate frog’s head, which dropped beside him. He joined in the laughter, stuffing the frog along with its head inside his mouth.

“Next term, Ron,” Harry offered.

“Like hell!” Ron snorted. “No, seriously! I’m not letting you out of my sight, Harry. I’ll pester Dad and make you come and stay at The Burrow.”

“That would be nice,” said Harry, while Ginny giggled beside him.

“That wouldn’t be a good idea, Ron.” Hermione looked pointedly at Harry.

As if registering for the first time that Harry and Ginny were not only sitting together, but exchanging looks as well, Ron mouthed as a goldfish out of water. “You two—”

“Of course they are!” Hermione announced matter-of-factly, as if it was written on both of their foreheads.

Ron suddenly stood up and made for Harry. It was so abrupt that Harry didn’t have time for any diversionary tactics, as Ron’s big hands clamped around his throat.

“YOU GIT! Why—didn’t—you—tell—me?” Ron wasn’t really blocking his air, except for choking him a little.

“I was going to! Gerroff me!”

Ron left him suddenly, and advanced on Ginny as she looked at him apprehensively.

“*Honestly*, Ron!” Hermione grabbed at his robes, tugging him backwards.

Ron plopped to his seat, and gave a mad cackle, as if his birthday had come early. “Oh Merlin, Ginny! My sister all grown up!”

“Stop it, Ron!” Ginny folded her arms huffily.

“Who would’ve thought, you two—” It seemed he was having a fit of some kind, as he quivered with mirth. “*His eyes are as green as a fresh pickled toad!*” he repeated a rather embarrassing poem that Ginny had once wrote Harry.



It was Harry's turn to laugh, however he stopped hastily looking at the withering look that Ginny was giving him and Ron.

"Don't even make me start!" Ginny said threateningly. "I was twelve, you git!"

*"His hair is dark as a blackboard!"* Ron seemed to be enjoying himself thoroughly.

"OK, shut it, Ron, we got the point," Harry warned. Realizing that Ron was only starting up, he finally had to relent with Strawberry Twisters. "Don't make me break your drawer, Ron."

That shut him quite eloquently up.

Hermione, who hadn't joined in the laughter before, looked quite intrigued. "What are you talking about, Harry?"

"Nothing!" Ron added quickly.

Exchanging looks with Ginny, Harry thought to tell them finally. *"We know!"*

"OH!" Hermione mouthed, turning red, while Ron turned redder than even her.

"Ginny, would this one be good? Would Hermione like it? It wouldn't smell, would it?" Ginny mimicked Ron, as she told them his story of selecting a perfume for Hermione last year.

"Yeah, yeah, have loads of fun on my expense!" Ron said sourly.

However, the tension and seriousness ebbed away, the prophecy wasn't mentioned any further, and their conversation steered off to other topics as Ron and Ginny's childhood tales, accompanied by a lot of sheepish smiles over Exploding snaps.

Soon, the Platform Nine and Three-Quarters came flashing by. They had already been saying their goodbyes to Luna, Dean, Seamus and Neville, when the train stopped at the station.

"I dunno what Dursleys' reaction would be over my scar," said Harry, trying to flatten his fringe over his forehead.

"It wouldn't matter, Harry," Hermione said soothingly.

"You can always scare them with the 'm' word, eh?" Ron winked at him.

Harry was surprised, seeing all the Weasleys except for Mr. Weasley and Charlie waving at them as they got off the train. Even Percy Weasley was present, a little away from the group, which might be because the twins kept on throwing him dirty looks.

Mrs. Weasley clutched Ginny and hugged her so crushingly that she had to shout, "Mum, Let me breathe!"

Next in line was Harry, who was given the same treatment, along with a dark look at his scar. "You saved her life again... what am I going to do with you, Harry?" She shook her head disdainfully at him.

Harry wanted to say, *because I like to*, but didn't say it aloud. Ginny caught his eye, and they grinned together.

The rest of the Weasleys came and shook his hand; in case of the twins, they thumped his back and gave him a sack of Weasleys' Wizard Wheezes goodies. Percy however, wanted a private word.

"Thanks for talking to Dad for me, Harry," he said, as soon as they were out of others' earshot.

"Er... I didn't..." Harry looked uncertainly at him.

Percy's ears went pink. "I thought it was you... Oh well, at least we're on talking terms again... I hope you're feeling all right?" His eyes moved to his scar.

"Yeah. Loads better," he said earnestly. "I think it was Dumbledore," he continued staring at his vacant expression, "I mean the one who talked about you to Mr. Weasley... He does it all the time."

"Yeah..." Comprehension dawned on Percy's face. "We haven't found Umbridge till now, you know... so you better watch out."

"It was you who tipped off the Daily Prophet?" Harry asked amazed, distinctly remembering the article about Fudge stepping down.

Percy nodded enthusiastically. "I've realized the error my ways..."

"Good for you," Harry looked at Ginny, who was trying to catch his attention. "OK, bye, Percy."

"Take care, Harry."

There was an awkward pause, as Harry faced Ginny and wanted to swoop down on her, but couldn't because of all the Weasleys present. Ron seemed to be going through the same problem with Hermione, as both of them shook their heads at each other miserably.

Harry came out of the barrier along the Weasleys, and immediately spotted the Dursleys standing in a corner—minus Dudley; they had their back to the platforms. Harry took that as an omen for even *more* displeased Dursleys than they typically were. He was sure that the hint of affection that he had seen in his aunt's eyes wouldn't be displayed in front of uncle Vernon.

He also distinctly recognized Tonks standing few paces behind them, chewing bubblegum, and looking uninterestingly at the passers-bys. He also spotted Dung stationed near a pole, jingling a can under the noses of whoever passed him by. Harry shook his head. So, *his guard was at it again*.

"Bye." Harry waved at the Weasleys and Grangers (both of whom were exchanging pleasantries with each other), when Ron and the twins came towards him.

"We only want to say *hi*," Fred said indulgently.

Harry knew for a fact that uncle Vernon wouldn't want to meet any of his friends even if they came with bowed shoulders. However, on much insistence, he made for the Dursleys along with the Weasley brothers.

Harry tapped Vernon Dursley's shoulder for getting his attention. Just as he had predicted, as soon as they spun on their heels, the pair of them recoiled at his image.

"What happened to—" Aunt Petunia stopped, looking at uncle Vernon's furious expression.

"Might've blown someone up again!" he said scathingly. "They must've given him their right mind, too." His bottlebrush moustache quivered in indignation, as his eyes kept on darting to his scar.

Aunt Petunia looked quite curious, but kept herself in check.

Looking at them, Harry guessed that either uncle Vernon's memory was modified, or he simply didn't want to remember that he and his family were saved by a bunch of wizards. Aunt Petunia on the other hand, looked amiable enough.

"Get a move on, boy, I don't have all day!" Vernon Dursley bristled at him, as he got over the shock of his scar.

"Don't push your luck, Dollop! He'll be of *age* soon!" Fred suddenly burst at his uncle, as Harry looked on, shocked.

"*What* did you call me?" His uncle's beetle eyes narrowed, while Aunt Petunia looked highly disconcerted.

"Didn't you hear him? Harry can use magic now!" George added, grinning along.

"And Apparate, too," said Ron, delighted at the Dursleys' expressions.

"You know, appear from one place and reappear in another," Fred supplied earnestly.

"He can hex too." George gave him a meaningful look, as uncle Vernon's bushy eyebrows flew to his head.

"*And Curse*," Ron added for fun, seeing Vernon Dursley's purple face, fuming over their daring to use so much magical jargon in front of him.

“And don’t forget *torment!*” Fred smiled at them, as if he was giving them the best news they had ever heard.

Before uncle Vernon could retort, Mrs. Weasley interrupted, “I think that’s enough, boys!”

“Ah, all right, Mum,” Fred said dejectedly.

“We were just warning these nice people, you know. Harry’s become so dangerous this year...” George added candidly.

Harry was torn between laughing his head off, or exuberate meanness by bunching his brows and giving the Dursleys full view of his scar.

“OK, bye, Harry!”

“Take care.”

“See you soon.”

They all departed after shaking his hand, winking at him meaningfully.

He waved at Ginny, who waved vigorously back, her eyes shining. If it was up to him, he would have stood there forever waving back to her. However, he got tugged at his sleeve by Aunt Petunia. With a last departing wave, he followed the Dursleys to the car park. Not dreading the summer holidays for the first time.

**-x- LE FIN -x-**

*It’s finished! I just can’t believe it! -weeps-*

***Dear Readers,*** *I can’t tell you how it feels... I feel positively writhing with excitement, and then again HBP is coming out in two days! My happiness knows no beyond right now! My head feels empty, and now I’m glad that I did the whole plot ramble in the last chapter because I really can’t think of anything right now!*

*One thing, of course, I want to say is about this whole experience. I still remember posting its first chapter at HPN and getting enthusiastic*

response. Posting at GH, where if I didn't post an update in two days, my readers went to mutiny (not that serious of course!). Then posting here, and getting still more love from my readers. Writing, I agree, is a very wondrous thing!

JKR has thought up such an inspiring world that it gave me the opportunity to write something magical of my own. 130,000 words long, this fic will always be dear to my heart.

### **First, Special Dedications:**

To, **Omair**, my trash-bin buddy, my bestest pal on earth, partner in crime, etc. etc. I can go on and on and still would be talking about this guy, who's kind of a miracle worker for me. Thanks for always being there, I truly feel lucky to have you as a friend! Cheers for our budha budhi days. ;)

To, **Elizabeth**, this fic wouldn't have been as good as its now, if you hadn't taken it up for beta-ing. I still remember the first few chapters which came back so red that my eyes popped. But, I'm a better writer now because of a lot of things that I learned from you. You've been an inspiration!

To, **Sonja**, you've joined this bandwagon very late, still your hawkeye has been more than appreciated! Thank you from the bottom of my heart.

To, **a lost friend**, May you find peace.

### **Thank you-s:**

I want to thank all the readers who have reviewed at HPN, DM, GH, FA and of course at ff! Each one of you has been my motivators in finishing this fic. In normal circumstances—the ones that I was in while this fic was only half complete—I seriously considered abandoning it. Writing to me, at that time didn't seem too attractive anymore. But, I got over the feeling, I thought about the readers who have loved this fic since last two years, and I thought I would disappoint them if I left it be. So, I decided—firmly—that I would see to its end. And I did.

*And it would never have been such a sweet ride, if it weren't for my dear readers, who are reading it still (and those who will be reading it later)! **Thank you so much!***

*Thanks are in order for **Omair, Mahjabeen, Missy May, green eyes, thephantom114, Heather, Macy, A Shadow of Deus, Draco's Wife Lover, Akanksha, Astrid** for dropping by this time around. I don't seem to have the energy to write replies individually (been on the PC for hours now!). So, I'll talk to you guys in the Epilogue.*

**Few Important Notes:**

***Any sequel?*** *Nopes. Sorry. I'm not going for this option because of canon discrepancies that will arise. Phantom114 summed it up for me.*

***Any shorties?*** *Perhaps... If my 'shadows' muses shower some at me, I may write few missing chapters, or even one-shots along the same plot-line. I already cut back on ideas for this fic, like there was supposed to be an attack on the Hogwarts Express, before it pulled from the Hogsmeade station. But, I let go of it because of the time factor.*

***Epilogue?*** *Of course! As I said before, I'll post it after the HBP frenzy. So, it would be updated at the end of July or maybe first week of August. If you don't have an ff account, you can give me your email address, and I'll email you when I post the epilogue.*

***So, cheers for the upcoming HBP! I hope you have enjoyed this fic as much as I have, in writing it.***

***Love and Huggles,***

***- Nymph Patronus a.k.a. Tania***

## - Epilogue -

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The journey back to Privet Drive was nothing but dull. Harry sat alone in the back seat—seeing, not seeing at all, the numerous buildings zipping past his window.

Vernon Dursley tried his best to keep his beady eyes on the road, along peering at Harry through the review-mirror. It seemed as though he was oscillating on the verge of saying something, but couldn't, as his eyes continuously kept on riveting at his extended scar. He looked madder—something Harry thought impossible after the Dementor incident last year.

Needless to say, Hedwig tried her best to behave; still, she kept on clicking her beak on her cage once every five minute as if to warn the Dursleys that they shouldn't try anything rash—much to Harry's amusement.

Harry felt detached somehow... a small part of him wanted to lash out at them, just for the sake of it. He was sick and tired of them staring at his scar as if it was some rude word stretched across his face—reminding him of Marietta Edgecombe—evaporating his own efforts of soothing. The reasonable side of him however, told him to take it easy. He heeded the latter.

Finally reaching number four, Harry shot out of the car and stood near the car bonnet so that he could take out his trunk. He looked around at the house to see an upstairs curtain drawn. He knew that it could be none other than his cousin, Dudley.

As if not noticing anything at all, Harry grasped the handle of his trunk, just as his uncle opened the bonnet. Vernon Dursley grumbled expletives at him as he heaved his trunk—because his hand got snagged from it—not that, it was intentional.

Harry pretended not to hear and hurried up the driveway and the flight of stairs to his room. He also pretended not to notice the saucer shaped eyes of Dudley peeking from his room. He had faced enough gawping this year to last the entire summer vacations.



He shut the door with a loud bang—expressing quite loudly that he wanted to be left alone. He heaved a sigh and leaned on his door to catch his breath, which was out and about because of hauling his trunk with one hand and clutching Hedwig's cage with the other. He let Hedwig out, and she nipped his ear affectionately before taking flight to catch some supper.

Harry sat on his bed and stared at the familiar room. Nothing had changed, except for the unusual cleanliness—a sign of his aunt's visit. The usual Gryffindor and Quidditch posters, his discarded quills and parchments were lying where he had left them.

While emptying his robe pockets from the sweets shoved by the twins, he found a crumpled parchment. He stared at it, knowing fully that he had never seen it before. However, a grin split his face after reading it. He carefully splayed it and safely tucked it beneath the clock he had once repaired himself.

*Take care of yourself, Harry! And be careful.*

*See you soon.*

*Love*

*- Ginny*

A warm feeling spread in his chest as he sighed into his hands, cupping them over his face. A wave of exhaustion however, soon followed, taking over his body. It seemed as if the days he had lost in Caeli were finally making their presence felt. He felt overjoyed; still, nonplussed by the things that had happened this year at Hogwarts and a world beyond.

A buzz started to fill his head, comprising of the voices of this year. And without even knowing what he was doing, he was sinking into his pillow, not even aware that his feet would feel sore afterwards with his trainers still on. He sank into the bed as if diving into a lake, not conscious of where he was and what he was doing.

-X-

*I can't still be at Caeli, can I?*

This was the first thing that came to his mind when his groggy eyes focused on the hazy luminescent hands of the bedside clock, its hands pointing to quarter to four.

He blinked in the surrounding darkness of the night, taking time in registering that it was past midnight, and he had spent more than ten hours in bed. When he finally opened his eyes fully, he was amazed to note that not only he felt light and refreshed, but wide awake as if someone had nudged him to do so.

He got up and got rid of his trainers, twiddling his toes, and changed into pyjamas. With the moonlight sweeping through his window he registered that Hedwig's cage was still empty. The reason of her absence made his stomach growl with hunger. He looked at the empty space near the dog flap of his door (installed few years ago to keep him locked into his room). So, his said relatives were so upset at his current predicament that his Aunt had forgotten to give him dinner, or maybe it was his uncle's doing.

*Oh well...* Harry sighed, and was just about to jump back to his bed when from the corner of his eye, he noticed something unexpected. In a flash—as if his body was working out of habit rather than impulse—he grasped his wand from his bedside and made for his trunk, the rim of which was bathed with a glow from inside.

He stepped up towards the end of his bed, his wand preceding his every move. He realized that he wasn't allowed to use magic for another month, but if something perilous had been smuggled into his trunk, he had no other choice.

*What could it be?* he thought disturbingly, as he stared at the hinges of the trunk which were giving off soft light, as if trapping a small sun inside.

He was aware of the fact that it could be anything; he had enough experience with magical objects, not to take such a phenomenon lightly. However, he didn't want to wait to discover what it was either.

Heart hammering in his chest, Harry backed away from the trunk and pulled its lid off, so that the light spilled into the room, giving an eerie look to everything. He craned his neck above the opened lid to see the source of light.

What he saw caused his heart rate to speed, and his mouth to gape.

*This can't be!*

Sirius's diary had mysteriously traveled up the piles of his clothes and books. And the mystery didn't end there. The diary was open, and was the source of the grayish light spilling into the room. It was as though it was the preparation for enticing him to take hold of it and tap it with his wand.

Many voices ran through his head.

"Someone could have tampered with it, Harry," Hermione's voice of reason warned.

"It could be a trap... I dunno, Harry," Ron's vague explanation hovered for a while.

"You should be cautious, Harry," Ginny spoke to him softly.

"*That* I already am," Harry said to the empty room—justifying the voices inside his head.

*This is Sirius's diary after all. It was never made to harm me; Sirius told me himself.* He looked down and picked the diary up gently, as if afraid that it would jolt him with a powerful shock—but nothing such happened. The diary felt to him as before, with no apparent changes.

*So, why is it glowing then?* his mind registered quite a glaring fact. But, a feeling in his gut told him that he should tap the wand. And so he did.

A familiar sensation gripped him. The surrounding walls of his room dissolved to a very familiar one—of number twelve, Grimmauld Place.

"Hello, Harry," a familiar voice echoed from behind.

Harry spun on his feet so fast that he staggered to a stop just a step before. Staring right at him was his godfather, Sirius Black.

“Sirius,” he said breathlessly, as his eyes bulged in surprise. “How—how—?”

“All in good time.” Sirius gave him a winning smile.

“How are you here? You told me, I could never talk to you directly again... Er... So how—”

“I lied, Harry,” Sirius said wincing, while Harry’s face set with perplexed anger.

“WHAT!”

“I’m sorry, Harry.” Sirius stood up from the rocking chair he was sitting on. “I knew if I didn’t discourage you properly you would’ve kept on fiddling with the diary—”

“Are you saying, I could’ve summoned you or something?” Harry stared on, shocked—looking betrayed.

“No! You couldn’t have... What I meant was, if I hadn’t made clear that you can’t visit me, you would’ve kept on visiting this diary on and off just to find some new quirk.”

“Is there one?” He didn’t want to sound hopeful, even though talking to his godfather was making him very much contented, even if it had come as a shock.

“Well...” Sirius looked at him seriously. “There is one thing... I reckoned, you would like to talk to me when you returned to the Dursleys, I thought to make it a yearly event so that you could talk to someone... I know it’s not the real me, but my shadow... I hoped that you’d feel all right talking about the gone year openly to someone rather than staying silent all summer in your Aunt’s house.”

“You could have tried me...” Even after trying his best to stay angry, Harry couldn’t. This was just too good to be true. It was as if he had

gotten his birthday present early, and he did not want to waste it with accusations.

“So, what happened?” Sirius tried his winning smile, for which he got a grin back. Harry could positively feel him relax.

“Loads!” And before he knew it, Harry launched into a long story. How he connected with his mother, and found out more about his parents and their adventures together. It was as if time passed swiftly and he didn’t even feel it. He recounted Caeli events and about the mysterious appearance of a Drifter named, Caradoc Dearborn.

“Rad! He’s alive?” Sirius exclaimed, while Harry launched into another tale of how Caradoc was sent to this time from another world by the otherworldly Ulterian Mages. He then moved on to the Vita Scrolls, how he found two of them, and his and Ginny’s final battle with Voldemort.

“Amazing...” Sirius looked at him proudly. “You gave your life for a good cause, and the bond of debt saved you! Ingenious...”

“I didn’t know what I was doing... I just went on as if I was meant to do it...”

Sirius looked hard at him, as if trying to derive his true intentions. “You like Ginny, don’t you?”

“Yeah...” Harry knew it was no use hiding it from Sirius.

“Clever girl, that one.” Sirius nodded his head in approval. “You’re at it like James. He got together with Lily at the end of his sixth-year too.”

They both smiled nostalgically, remembering their mutual loved ones. As if distracted, Sirius looked at something behind him and frowned. Harry spun around to see an old clock showing eight o’clock.

“It’s time,” Sirius said, looking forlornly at Harry.

“Already?” Harry didn’t hide his disappointment. It felt to him, as if he had just started talking to him.

"It's been four hours, Harry." Sirius grasped his shoulder, while smiling at him. "This is not the end, though. I'll meet you next year, same time same date."

"I can't promise I'll be here, Sirius," Harry said, not with regret but with the air of a man who had accepted what was to come. "I don't think I would be returning to Privet Drive of all places, even if I survived...."

"Oh... I..." Sirius looked at him troublingly. It was as if he was struggling to say something but couldn't make up his mind about it.

"I'm not afraid." Harry shook his head decidedly. He had realized in his train journey back that there was no looking back from the fate that awaited him. Not at all. The moment of clarity that he had experienced after getting hit with the killing curse had been nothing but revelation for him. He knew perfectly that he wouldn't be here forever. That there was end to everything, and he had been prophesized to cause the end of the overlord who had spread so much hate and fear in the wizarding world that it's needed to be stopped. Even if he had to give his own life for it....

"I know one thing for sure, Harry," Sirius's voice broke his reverie. "If somebody has to do it; it better be you."

Coming from Sirius, this was sure something. Harry stared at his eyes, which were gleaming knowingly.

"I hope you kick his forking bottom!"

And as Harry's mouth split to let out the bursting laughter, the walls of Grimmauld Place started melting away to his own room at number four.

*"I'll see you soon, wherever you are!"*

His laughter died with the loss of pressure from Sirius's hand that had been grabbing his shoulder.

Still, a smile remained behind as he sat on his bed and stared at the early morning's orange sun. His heart felt light, as if a large burden had been lifted. Suddenly, reliving the last year gave him an insight

on things he hadn't bothered to contemplate. He knew what he had to do, and this acceptance was the first step to understand how he ought to do it. He knew that the Scroll powers buried in his body would help him accomplish his goals.

And as the sun slowly climbed high in the sky, a faint hope flickered in his heart, if he lived to see the coming year, he would at least get to talk to Sirius again; the last remnant of his parents and father figure.

The thought made him smile contentedly as he stretched on his bed, thinking about the possibilities his survival would bring. A new life with the people he loved and admired. A career he could easily fall on.

As the future swirled in his mind, drowsiness took over again. And he fell to a very deep sleep.

**-x-X- THE END -X-x-**

*This was for all my faithful readers who have followed this fic so regularly. Thank You all! And to the beloved memory of Sirius.*

***Post your final words about this fic, of course!***